

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Introducing Your Child to Eucharist** First Communion Preparation Meeting for Parents Wednesday, January 30, 2008 7:00 PM (Historical and present day practices) (The first of a lifelong habit of many Communion)

Good evening everyone.

There are in our Church **three Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist**. Ordinarily we understand all three as interrelated. In the beginning the gospel was preached to adults, and adults received the gospel. That reception was symbolized and signified by the triple sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist.

Now very early on in the life of the Church the issue came up, well, what about children? Where do they fit into our Church? And the answer was if the head of the family, the father, became a Christian, then the children were considered part of the Church thereby. They did not need to be baptized. But if the head of the family was not a Christian, which is very common among the Gentiles—among the Gentiles very often the women, the mothers became Christian, but not the fathers. In that case the children were not considered automatically part of the Church, and therefore they were brought to the font with their mothers, and **the mother was baptized with her children**. If she had children after her Baptism, then she would bring them later. That's how the custom arose of infant Baptism. However, it wasn't universal at first. **In the days of St. Augustine, for example, there was no infant Baptism. It had been before. It stopped, and then, because of Augustine, it was resumed.**

Now two different styles existed in the Church. **In the East, even with children, infants, all three sacraments were given together.** It is still this way today in the Greek Orthodox Church, in the Russian Orthodox Church. A child is baptized, confirmed, and given Holy Communion on the same day, although because Communion requires swallowing they often delayed the Baptism as much as one year.

Now a different style emerged in the **West**. First of all, very often the minister of Baptism was a deacon, so a deacon could not confer Confirmation. Anyone actually can confer Baptism, even a non-Christian; if he or she intends to do what the Church does, that person can baptize. But a deacon is not authorized, never was, to confer sacraments. It required Holy Orders, so they could not Confirm. So that was dropped. Eucharist was never given to children in the western part of the Roman Empire, that is, the Roman sphere of influence. We are the heirs of that tradition, so **we never have given infants the sacrament of Eucharist.**

So the question arose: "Well, when should people receive Eucharist? The answer was originally when they are ready to become adults, so around twelve, thirteen years old. That was the style for centuries. Only in the beginning of the twentieth century did **Pope Pius X** decide that that wasn't really fair, nor was it necessary to hold children back that long. First of all, he criticized the idea that children should be knowledgeable in theology,

pass a test in order to receive. No, he said that they had to have the **use of reason**. That means they **had to be able to tell the difference between ordinary bread that they ate at home in the kitchen and the bread of the altar**. They should be able to tell that they weren't the same thing; therefore, they also had to be able to learn, at their own rate, but they didn't have to accumulate knowledge. **They just had to be able to learn**. So back in about **1907**, or something like, that the Roman Catholic Church started to give children First Communion when they reached the age of reason. That was reckoned around **seven years old**, although that's disputed by some people. Obviously kids are different. Some kids would reach the age of reason earlier and others later, but more or less seven years old.

Now there is a big difference between the first two sacraments and the third. **Baptism and Confirmation bestow an indelible, lifelong mark or character on the soul**. Therefore even if a child receives this in infancy, later on learning about it, that sacrament is still active through the indelible character. **But with Eucharist that's not true**. With Eucharist the means of the Eucharistic grace is actually the bread and the wine itself and is consumed. So therefore when the bread and the wine consecrated into the body and blood of Christ has been digested, the sacrament is no longer present. It does not perdure as does the sacrament of Baptism or Confirmation or Holy Orders or Matrimony; therefore, it requires a different understanding.

Now in the West it has been forbidden to give infants Eucharist partly because of counteracting the idea of magic. Some people thought, or maybe even do still think, that a sacrament has some sort of power apart from the receptivity of the person receiving it: their readiness, their openness, their willingness to cooperate with grace. That would be magic, and **we don't believe in magic**. But children are very willing to receive what they are given. Have any of your children ever turned down a present? No, they take what they are given because **they trust the person who gives it to them**. So there is no thought that they would not want what they are given. So **if they have the age of reason and they know that this is really something special, then they are ready**.

**But are you ready? That's another question. And that is something I would like to invite you to think about.**

Now in Baptism you promised to rear your children in the practice of our faith by loving God and neighbor as Christ taught us. But now by bringing them to the Eucharistic table you are taking on a deeper responsibility, a more rigorous one. **By introducing them to the table of the Lord**—and it isn't simply you that is doing it; it's the whole parish doing it, the whole church is actually doing this—but you are the one saying, “Yes, this is what we want for our child,” **you are really agreeing to the discipline of weekly Eucharist**, because that is the Church's habit. We gather weekly for the Eucharist. We break bread every week in honor of the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. It is our understanding that by so doing we are participating in the fruit of the sacrament. And **without our active participation we do not receive that fruit**, those blessings—if you want to call them that—or that grace. So we have to **think about: “Are we as parents really ready to do this?” You are not a bad parent if you are having a faith crisis.**

People do have faith crises. Saints had faith crises. But the question is: “Do you really want to introduce your child into a hypocritical situation, where you are introducing them to the sacrament that they will then not receive until Christmas because you don’t come to Mass?” I think that is grossly unfair, and I think you need to think about it. You are not a bad parent if you don’t bring your child to First Eucharist at this time.

Now the benefits and blessings that are attached to Baptism because it leaves a character with us are available to us at all times and all places. So, in a sense, we don’t have to come to Mass, to Church, or even gather with other Christians to benefit from the grace given. This is also true of Confirmation. But Eucharist is different. **Eucharist is itself a communal sacrament**, and therefore we do have to gather with the community, and **we do depend upon the community for that sacrament and the blessings that come from it.**

The Church when it gathers, it gathers in a spirit of praise and thanksgiving. The word “Eucharist” actually means “thanksgiving.” The purpose is that we are being **invited to participate in what Jesus did for us on the cross.** We believe that Jesus made of his own life and of his own death a gift to the Father. Through our participation in the Eucharist, **we are allowed to share in that gift and become part of the gift**—both—to share in it and become part of it. That is our participation in the Eucharistic celebration or the sacrifice of the Mass, another term that means the same thing. Now this requires, of course, **our willingness and our devotion and our faith.** So when we come to the Mass, **we bring the week before with us and we are preparing for the week facing us** so that the whole may be sanctified through the gift of Christ.

When we think about **First Holy Communion**, it’s very important that we think of it now in terms of a series or **a new habit of life: the first of many Communions.** When Pope Pius X spoke of Eucharist, he said that it was important that we receive it early and often, just like voting in Cook County. Up until his day that had not been the tradition. Up to his day it was very common for Catholics to receive Eucharist only once a year. But being a student of theology and liturgy, as he was, he knew that was not the way the Church originally was, and he knew that was not a way to build up people’s faith.

Now when we think of the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, it is a very holy event and a very important event. It involves the whole parish; therefore, **the Sunday Eucharist is the ideal place to introduce new communicants to the Lord in his sacrament** for two reasons. Number one, the day itself is holy because it was made holy by the resurrection of Christ. It is not the Sabbath of the Torah. The Sabbath of the Torah is Saturday, the day of rest. We do not keep holy the day of rest because **Christ consecrated Sunday through his resurrection**, and that has become our Christian, our Catholic, belief and practice.

Now because Sunday is a holy day and the Lord’s day, it has this special character. And one of our responsibilities, which I know is very difficult for us to do today, but one of the things we have to work on is **trying to find ways of making Sunday the Lord’s day.** It’s not so simple.

Now the second reason why Sunday is an ideal day to bring children to First Communion is practical. I am the only priest assigned to this parish. And we have to start thinking about the future and about how to practically deal with the situation we are in. I believe that at this time, at this junction in life at St. Margaret Mary Parish, it's a good time to start a new tradition of bringing children to the Eucharist for the first time on a Sunday in a **Sunday liturgy; and hopefully there will be some members of the parish also there, so that this is really a communal responsibility of the whole parish, a communal act of the whole parish, not simply a matter of this particular family** having a family outing, but much deeper, much broader, much richer.

So through the celebration of Eucharist and **through the constant celebration of the Eucharist, gradually we come to be able to own and join into and share in Christ's own life-giving death and life-giving resurrection.** This is the very idea of a sacrificial meal. That's what we are sharing. We are sharing the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of **Christ raised from the dead in his glorified nature. That is whom we are meeting.** It's not a thing we receive; it's a person.

Now as a final note, it is very important that we have **family festivities**; that's very nice. But they should **support rather than supplant the spiritual meaning of Eucharist.** So I just extend that to you and ask you to **in your own wisdom try to find a way to do that**, so that what happens at home enhances and doesn't take away from what happens here. So thank you for your kind attention.