

# Believe, Celebrate, Live

#4: COMMUNION

May 2, 2010

The Eucharist is a mystery to be BELIEVED, and CELEBRATED, and LIVED! This Easter season a spoken reflection at each Mass and a series of bulletin inserts will help us explore the Mass more deeply.

## *The Lord's Prayer*

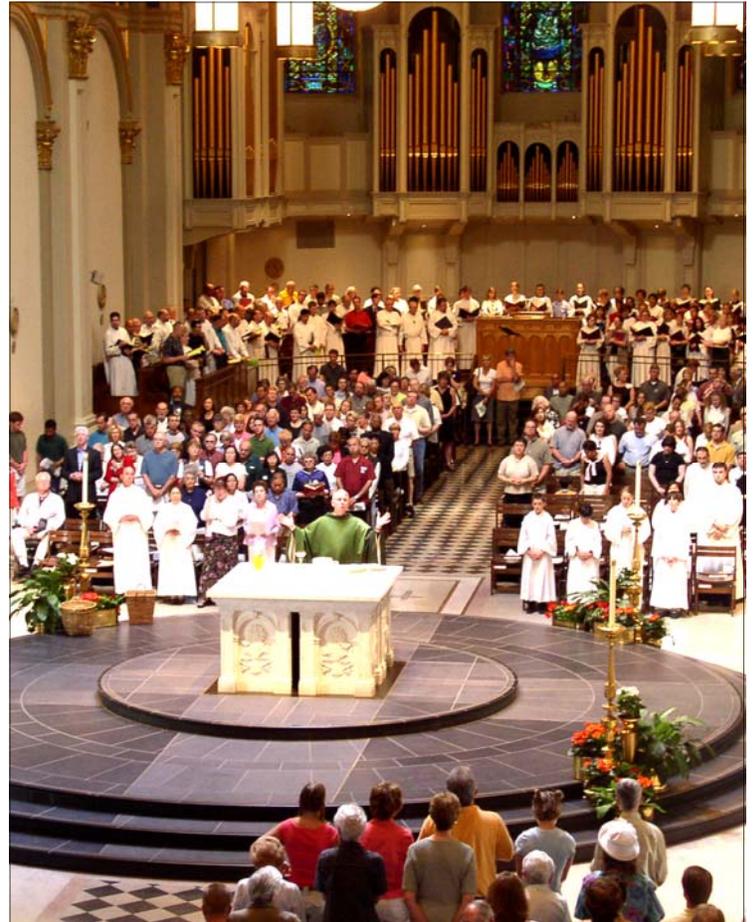
The Lord's Prayer is said or sung almost every time the Church gathers for prayer. Even when communion is taken to the sick, the brief prayers accompanying the rite always include the Lord's Prayer. And it is prayed at every Mass, where it marks the beginning of the Communion Rite.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom, an "Advent" prayer, as it were. But it is also a community prayer for reconciliation and forgiveness. When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to pray *together*: "we," not "I." He taught us to look, as a community, to the coming of the kingdom, without neglecting to ask for "our daily bread." And he taught us to seek forgiveness, not only from God but from each other: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." For St. Augustine, these words of forgiveness had special importance when the prayer was said at Mass: "As a result of these words we approach the altar with clean faces; with clean faces we share in the body and blood of Christ."

## *Sign of Peace*

The Sign of Peace "generated perhaps more opposition and controversy than any of the changes in the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council" (Champlin). Shaking hands in church?! And yet it is an ancient practice, vouched for by none other than St. Paul himself, who told the Romans to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (16:16). Tertullian called the kiss of peace "a seal set upon the prayer."

The peace is a ritual moment, not "a greeting or a welcome, but rather a sign and vehicle of reconciliation" (Champlin). As we exchange the sign of peace with those around us, we come face to face with Christ's presence in the assembly of which we are a part, a presence which can be harder to grasp, at times,



than his presence under the veil of a sacrament in bread and wine. The Church provides no specific words and no specific sign for this moment. This rite is celebrated by the faithful, and every community is free to pray this moment of reconciliation in its own way.

## *The Breaking of the Bread*

"Christ's gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper... gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times" (GIRM 83). The breaking of bread was central to St. Paul's understanding of the church itself: "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:17).

As the bread is broken, we pray a litany: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.... Grant us peace." This litany has a different function from the Kyrie with which the Mass began,

and which it echoes. As Father Champlin observes, “the word ‘mercy’ means more than our customary English ‘forgiveness’ or ‘compassion.’” It would be a mistake to hear this as a plea to a just judge—a plea not to be punished. Rather, in asking Jesus the Lamb to “have mercy on us,” we are imploring “all of God’s blessings” (Champlin).



The bread is broken; the wine is poured. The priest takes the broken host and raises it, with the chalice, for all to see. And then he invites the people to communion in words that echo the litany just prayed, and the words of the angel to Saint John in Revelation 19: 9: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” At this moment, as we wait to come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ, we are also, in a sense, waiting for the culmination of all things, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

## Communion Procession

From the Gospels, we know that the Last Supper was anything but a passive event. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples; they prayed together as he broke the bread; and when he foretold his betrayal, “they began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, ‘Surely it is not I?’” (Mark 14: 19).

For us, too, communion is a moment of decision and action, a moment when we let Jesus serve us, and when we are challenged to declare our faith in him. Communion is not brought to us where we are; we do not pass a plate along each row. No, we move, we stand up, we go forward to the altar: we make a choice. And we do not receive the body and blood of Christ in silence, but with music and with dialogue. “The body

of Christ.” “Amen.” “The blood of Christ.” “Amen.”

The procession is an expression of community: in it the body of Christ is given under one sign, and formed under another. But at the same time, communion is a private moment, when each Christian individually approaches and, one by one, receives God’s gift of himself. St. Cyril, in his 4th

-century instructions to the neophytes of Jerusalem, captures the wonderful mystery and intimacy of this moment: “When you come forward, do not draw near with your hands wide open or with your fingers spread apart; instead, with your left hand make a throne for your right hand, which will receive the King. Receive the Body of Christ in the hollow of your hand and give the response: ‘Amen’.... Draw near also to the cup of his Blood... and say: ‘Amen’... Then, while waiting for the prayer, give thanks to God who judged you worthy of such mysteries.”

Continue your exploration of the Mass at [www.stjames-cathedral.org/believe](http://www.stjames-cathedral.org/believe).

In the next issue: **SENDING FORTH.**

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy

## For Further Reading

- Joseph Champlin. *Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*
- Lucien Deiss. *The Mass*
- Jeremy Driscoll, OSB. *What Happens at Mass.*
- Lawrence J. Johnson. *The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass*
- Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger. *The Mass*
- Timothy Radcliffe. *Why Go to Church?*

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## For Reflection and Discussion

- **BELIEVE IT.** How does the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist challenge you? Comfort you? Change you?
- **CELEBRATE IT.** Is the reception of Holy Communion a private moment or a communal moment? Or both?
- **LIVE IT.** Do you remember your First Communion? How does receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist impact your life?

