

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

We Catholics believe that in the eucharist Jesus Christ is truly present under the forms of bread and wine. We reserve consecrated hosts in the tabernacle, so we have the greatest respect for that part of our church buildings. When we make a genuflection on entering and leaving a church, we are actually genuflecting toward the tabernacle.

However, once mass has begun, the Catholic Church asks the priest and other ministers not to genuflect to the tabernacle during mass because the center of focus moves to the altar. The altar is where we place our offerings, and from where we receive communion. The bread and wine that we place there becomes the body and blood of Christ. The priest is supposed to give communion to the people from the bread and wine he consecrates at that mass. Many priests do not. They open the tabernacle at every mass, remove hosts consecrated at a previous mass, and distribute these to the people. It's still the body of Christ, but the communion you receive is supposed to be the fruit of the sacrifice you place on the altar at the same mass. Parents sacrifice to take care of sick children. Workers sacrifice to provide for their families. Friends sacrifice when their friends get in trouble. You sacrifice when you provide food and shelter, when you drive your car with courtesy for others, and when you take care of your own health. All those sacrifices that we make every day, we place them on the altar with the bread and wine, and we pray that my sacrifice and yours will be acceptable to God. When we receive the bread and wine transformed at this mass, it reassures us that God is giving us the nourishment we need in order to sacrifice again in the coming week.

Sometimes it looks as if some Catholics think that the communion in the tabernacle is holier than the communion from the altar. I have seen communion ministers receive communion, take a ciborium of consecrated hosts in their hands, bow to the tabernacle, and then distribute communion. It makes me want to ask them, "What do you think you're holding in your hands?" I have seen communicants receive the body of Christ, step to the side, and bow to the tabernacle before returning to their place. I want to ask them, "What do you think you just received?" The Catholic Church asks us not to make reverences to the tabernacle during the course of the mass because it could appear that we don't really believe what is happening at the altar - that Jesus Christ truly becomes present to us under the forms of bread and wine.

Today we hear the last of a series of second readings from the Letter to the Hebrews. This passage contrasts the actions of Moses with the actions of Christians. On Mount Sinai Moses approached "a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and a storm and a trumpet blast," but we Christians approach "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant." When we gather at the eucharist, we are in the city of the living God. We show reverence to God when we bow and genuflect, when we pay attention to the prayers, when we raise and lower the kneelers quietly, when we instruct children in good habits of prayer, when we shut off our cell phones, when we sacrifice our lives for God upon this altar, and when we receive from God's own table the body and blood of Christ.