

In the years before their first communion, toddlers figure out that everybody else is getting something that they're not. It's a growing awareness. At first they just notice that they're being left out: They look at the bowl of hosts; they look at your mouth. Then they get inquisitive. They ask out loud right in the communion line, "What's that?" Then on a later occasion they'll say, "I want some." They may even extend their hands to imitate others in line, thinking that must be the secret handshake that releases the free food. Finally they ask more defiantly, "Why can't I have one?"

Believe it or not, I find this one of the most profound questions ever asked in church, and it comes from a toddler wondering about communion: "Why can't I have one?" After all, the child is baptized, is not guilty of any personal sin, and has incurred no penalty from the Catholic Church's code of canon law. The kid has figured out that the food and drink at mass is something very special, and that he or she is being excluded from a good that everyone else is sharing. "Why can't I have one?" is a very good question.

The short answer is that we expect children first to understand more about their faith, so that their communion is not just a sign of inclusion, but of their knowledge and commitment. Of course, none of us has complete knowledge about God, and none of us is entirely faithful to our commitments. So we are never really ready for communion, and we say this each time before we receive it: "Lord, I am not worthy."

Still, we expect children to prepare before they receive, and we set aside a special day with a beautiful ceremony to welcome them to this table for the first time. This is an inheritance we pass on to children. We want them to know that communion is important to us.

In today's second reading Saint Peter praises God who gives us an inheritance. We are God's children, begotten by baptism, and we receive eternal life as our inheritance. There are times we suffer various trials, Peter says, but they make our faith stronger, as we learn to rely on the God who gives us life in the first place.

We all face trials: threats, suffering, loss, poverty, strained friendships, broken spirits and broken bones. Through them all we receive living hope, but we want something more. While we await the full gifts of God – peace, love and happiness – we are like toddlers in a communion line saying, "Why can't I have one?" We do not yet fully experience these gifts, but we will. We must be patient and be prepared. The communion we share now is a sign of the inheritance to come. Through times of trial, communion strengthens our hope.