

First communion has become a social event as well as a religious one. The family comes together. Parents show off how the children are growing. The kids dress up. They receive gifts. In many ways, we tell the kids, "This is a big deal." As a social event, first communion celebrations resemble some other ones. But they are unique because of what they mean: a Christian is coming to the communion table to share the body and blood of Christ for the first time. We pray that throughout their lives the children will treasure the eucharist in the same way we do. The eucharist is the source of our strength, and the highlight of our prayer. When we come to mass we bring with us the cares of the past week, and we receive nourishment to continue living our faith in the week ahead. Communion is a big deal for us.

It was also a big deal for Jesus. On the night before he died, he gathered his disciples and shared communion with them for the first time. It was a social event; it happened during a formal meal. But it was also a religious event unlike any other in history.

We know what happened that night because of five different testimonies. Each of the four gospels tells about the Last Supper, and so does Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, in the passage we heard tonight as our second reading. The gospels were written between 70 and 100 AD. Paul wrote this letter around 54 AD, just 20 years after the Last Supper took place. Paul's account is the earliest record of the Last Supper, but it is also the earliest written record of a direct quote of Jesus. Within those 20 years, people were quoting Jesus in conversation, but Paul wrote down something Jesus said, something he thought was important for everybody to know, that on the night before he died, Jesus made these statements: "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

It's no wonder that these words have become so important to us. They are the oldest written words we have of something Jesus spoke, and they concern the very heart of our faith. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead, that he is truly present in the eucharist, that he gave his body and blood for us, that we have entered a new covenant with God, that whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we do it in remembrance of Jesus, and when we do it, we proclaim his death until he comes again.

In addition to first communion, the Church also offers a ceremony you could call "last communion" – it is the communion we share with those who are dying. Its official name is "viaticum" or "food for the journey." Any communion minister can administer it; it doesn't have to be a priest, but I want to do it if I can. Viaticum includes an opportunity for the sick to renew their baptismal promises, and to receive the food that will escort them on the journey forth. If someone would like to receive viaticum, it helps us to know about it while the person is still able to respond and to swallow. From our earliest days to the end of our days, the eucharist nourishes us, and through it we proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ.