



Reflection from Fr. Garry Richmeier

My brother had a pawpaw tree close to where he lived, and he would pick the fruit to eat. I had never tasted pawpaw, so I asked him what it tasted like. He gave me a description and explanation of the taste, basically comparing its taste and texture to fruit I was familiar with. I went to visit him one day when the pawpaws were ripe and I tasted one. That's when I really knew what a pawpaw was. From there on, no one had to explain to me what a pawpaw was -- the experience of eating one was all the explanation I will ever need.

Our nation's bishops have declared this a year of Eucharistic Revival, and our diocese has given guidelines to those of us who preach for teaching and explaining the Eucharist. It continues our church's tradition of stressing explanation, teaching, and prescribing appropriate behavior as ways to help people in their relationship with God and with each other. There is nothing wrong with explanations and rules and teachings when trying to describe the Eucharist. But if one wants to really know what the Eucharist is, experiencing it is the ultimate teacher. Once Eucharist is experienced in its fullest sense, no more explanation is necessary, just like my experience of the pawpaw.

I suspect there is some unease and anxiety among church leaders regarding declining participation in Sunday mass among Catholics these days. The leaders may be "doubling down" on using extra explanation and teaching about the Eucharist as ways to get people back. The problem is probably not a lack of teaching and education, but a lack of providing a full, meaningful, and relatable experience of Eucharist. A fuller experience of Eucharist would include more than just performing the mass with the right prayers, the right posture, the right language, the right chalices, the right building, etc. It would also include emphasizing how participants are the Eucharist, the Body of Christ flowing out into the community and workplace. It would mean allowing the "one size fits all" Eucharistic liturgy to be adapted as appropriate to speak to different cultures and congregations. It would also mean being more inviting (rather than exclusionary) to those who don't fit the mold of the faithful Catholic.

I don't think people come to St. James because someone has explained to them the theology and importance of the Eucharist. I think people come to St. James because they have experienced a fuller sense of Eucharist than what has been offered in the official teachings. We experience belonging, connection, mission, purpose, support, diversity, social justice awareness and action, and many other things that aren't typically included in traditional explanations of the Eucharist. It is through that experience that we know what the Eucharist is.

Peace,

Fr. Garry