April 7, 2019: Fifth Sunday of Lent

About a month ago, I received a call from Tom Moran who asked me to visit his brother Gerry at Sunny Acres Nursing Home. At this point Gerry was very ill, and Tom knew his brother would want to be anointed and receive communion. I told him I was happy to go and see his brother. As I walked into Gerry’s room it became clear to me that he was very ill. But Gerry had a huge smile on his face and greeted me with such an exuberance of cheer that it brought a smile to my face as well. Though it was difficult for him, he stood up—as he made clear—to properly greet me, even though I told him it was okay to remain seated. We sat down together and talked for a while. When our conversation came to an end, we celebrated the anointing and the reception of communion.

When it came time to receive communion, Gerry slowly raised himself up from the chair and began to kneel down on the floor. I tried to prevent him from doing this, for it was clear that this took tremendous effort on his part. It probably took him three minutes to make this maneuver, but Gerry was bound and determined to show his reverence to the Eucharist no matter what it cost him. As he received the Eucharist, his devotion to Christ was so evident, and his love for God was so clear. I was truly humbled by his action and the depth of faith that he displayed.

Gerry has since passed away, but I know he was ready to see his God. He clearly had no fear of what was coming and simply was waiting for God to call him home. His faith in Christ and his love for God were clearly at the center of how he lived his life. Moreover, his love for, and belief in, the Eucharist undoubtedly took center stage.

As I pondered that encounter over the last few weeks, it has made me think about my own approach to the Eucharist. As Catholics, we are called to not simply believe, but to come to know who the Eucharist is. The Eucharist is really, truly, substantially the Body and Blood of Jesus. Each time Mass is celebrated an amazing miracle occurs: bread and wine, by the grace of God, are transformed into the very presence of Christ. Bread truly becomes His Body and wine truly becomes His Blood. The Eucharist is not something, but is truly Christ himself. It is the same Jesus who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Blessed Mother. It is the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem. It is the same Jesus who was brought to the Temple as an infant. It is the same Jesus who was tempted in the desert. It is the same Jesus who walked throughout Israel and preached the message of the Kingdom of God. It is the same Jesus who shared the Last Supper with his disciples and instituted the Holy Eucharist. It is the same Jesus who suffered and died for our sins. It is the same Jesus who rose from the dead and walked the earth for forty days. It is the same Jesus who ascended into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. The only difference between what we see in the Eucharist and the Jesus of two thousand years ago is in presentation—He simply looks different.

Jesus gives himself to us through the Eucharist to help strengthen us in becoming his presence in the world. Our actions and words must become a reflection of Christ. As Saint Teresa of Avila said in her prayer, “We must become the feet, the hands, the mouth of Christ. If we do not become his presence, how will anyone come to know Him?” But, in order for that to happen, we must really believe that what we are receiving in the Eucharist is truly Christ.

One way we can reflect on our own belief is to look at how we act when we come into the church. Gerry struggled to kneel and receive the Eucharist because he knew who was now before him—Jesus! When we walk into a church, we are coming into the very presence of Christ because the Eucharist is reposed in the tabernacle. The candle next to it is always kept burning as a reminder to us of the True Light contained in the tabernacle. Knowing Jesus is present to us whenever we go into a church, what reverence do we show Him? Do we genuflect (kneel down on our right knee)? Or, do we show Him some other form of reverence if we cannot kneel? Or, do we simply ignore Jesus or take Him for granted? How do we acknowledge Christ who is making himself present to us?
We could ponder the meaning of the Eucharist for the rest of our life and throughout all eternity, and still we could never fully grasp or fathom its immense meaning. It is a gift freely given, and no gift we receive can ever compare with the Eucharist, made possible by God’s love for us. Each time we come into the presence of Eucharist—into the very presence of Christ—may we stop and wonder, in awe. May our bodies come to express in some small way our acknowledgement of this most wonderful gift. May we never lose sight of the miraculous and gracious gift that God gives us—the gift of his very self.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian