

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Cor 11:23-24). Saint Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, is the earliest written account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. How fitting that it is our Second Reading at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper for Holy Thursday. The apostle emphasizes Jesus’ action of self-giving (“This is my body that is for you”) and his command to gather as a community and “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11: 24).

The Corinthians were a very divided community with factions and cliques. To help the Corinthians to unite, to work together, and to worship together, Paul emphasizes the importance of Communion. When we think of Communion, we may think simply of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ.

Communion comes from the Greek word *koinonia* which has multiple meanings that all work in harmony together. A simple image that comes to mind is light shining through a prism to make a spectrum of colors: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue and Purple. Interestingly, a second prism may be used to take these varied colors of the spectrum and unite them back into white light.

So let us look at a spectrum of meanings of the Greek word *koinonia* as we look at how Paul tried to unite the Corinthian community.

- Solidarity –For Paul, baptism creates a *koinonia* of solidarity. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). Through our common baptism, we are united with Christ in death and resurrection.
- Participation – The Church is most visible as the Body of Christ when it is gathered in unity and in relationship to celebrate the Eucharist. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation [a *koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation [a *koinonia*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17). When everyone actively participates, individuals unite as a community.
- Fellowship – Keep in mind that Paul has pointed out a shortcoming in the Corinthian community. “When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord’s supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry” (1 Cor 11:20-21). Paul highlights the fellowship of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to think of others first before they think of themselves. The Macedonians were willing to help with a collection for the poor in Jerusalem despite “their profound poverty.” They nevertheless “overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (2 Cor 8: 1-3). Recognizing the self-sacrificial nature of Jesus in the Eucharist, we are called to fellowship as we generously give thinking of the needs of others as most important.
- Communion – *Koinonia* is relational both with God and with our fellow Christians. At Mass, the words of Jesus are prayed by the priest acting in the person of Christ. He invokes the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus. The gift of Jesus in Communion is offered to God the Father who offers it back to us that we may receive the Body and Blood of His Son. The community receives the gift of the Son offered back to it by the Father in Holy Communion. God wants to change us to become holier people not simply for our own sake but so that we reach out to others and relate to them with the love of Christ. Just as the Trinity is relational, so too must one think of the community of Christians. Identity as a community of believers comes from being called into *koinonia* with Christ.

Saint Paul was concerned with the community of believers in Corinth who lacked *koinonia*. We can use that same lens to look at the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Let us recall the prism bringing everything back together into one vivid white light. In the reading of the Transfiguration (from the 2nd Sunday of Lent), Peter, James, and John, glimpsed ever so briefly the white light: Jesus' "face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them" (Matthew 17:2). With the arrest of Jesus, the apostles scatter in fear. The resurrected Jesus appears to them in the locked room, where fear still holds them in its grasp. Jesus unites them and offers them his peace. They are not in complete solidarity until doubting Thomas comes around. Then united by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they are ready to boldly proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth.

We live in a world that is more divided than that of the Corinthians. Amidst the pandemic, fear of infection is running high. Let us review our understanding of *koinonia* as we look for ways to unite and put our divisions aside.

- **Solidarity:** At the outset of the 2nd World War, Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "United we stand, divided we fall." The world of today needs us to stand together in solidarity more than ever before. The virus knows no boundaries, nor any social class distinctions. One positive shift in mental attitudes is that as people in the cities experience shortages, they have a better appreciation for the sacrifices that many in the bush have always faced by living farther away from medical care and the supply chain.
- **Participation:** If The Church is most visible as the Body of Christ when it is gathered in unity and in relationship to celebrate the Eucharist, how can we describe the church today when the doors are closed and reception of the Body of Christ is sacrificed in order to maintain social distance and reduce the spreading of the virus.
In the midst of our current situation, Spiritual Communion is recommended for our active participation. On Holy Thursday, 2003, St. John Paul II wrote: "it is good to *cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist*. This was the origin of the practice of 'spiritual communion', which has happily been established in the Church for centuries and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life. Saint Teresa of Jesus wrote: 'When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you'" (*Ecclesia Eucharistia*, 34).
- **Fellowship** – A shortcoming in our own day and age is that life is so busy, that families often lack the time to sit down to dinner and eat as a family and share time in fellowship. One positive side effect of our new stay-in-place lifestyle is that I am able to share meals with my brother priests and our bishop on a daily basis. Our days are full, fuller in fact as we work around the difficulties of providing virtual ministry, but in the evening, we have time to share a meal and fellowship. My prayer is that where possible, every family is able to do this. And where we have a neighbor who is all alone, let us be generous like the Macedonians overflowing with hearts to reach out to them in some form of *koinonia*.
- **Communion** - There is a hunger for Holy Communion that can only be satisfied by full, active, participation in the Mass. In 1989, I lived in Nome and experienced my first Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest. It took some years for me to recognize that God was calling me to serve as a priest. My prayer is that the increased hunger all our experiencing will encourage other vocations so that one day every community in our diocese will be served by a priest and that every Catholic will hunger to receive the Body of Christ.

