

GROWING UP CATHOLIC THE PURSUIT FOR TRUTH

from tradition to satisfaction

By

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SECTION FOUR

THE HEART OF THE MASS

When attending mass on Sunday mornings, most consider it reverent and mystical. Walking into church, we dip our right hand in holy water, make the sign of the cross, and genuflect before sitting down. Serenity dominates the entire church atmosphere as people arrive to find their seats and wait for mass to begin.

With the many signs, symbols, priestly garments and actions that are present during the mass, it sends a signal of raw spirituality. At the center of the mass is the bread and wine which is turned into Jesus's body and blood. For that procedure to take place, the priest recites certain prayers along with the faithful, which is called the transubstantiation, i.e. the bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Jesus at the altar.

Section Four investigates the significance behind the transubstantiation belief. Including resolving frequently asked questions that parishioners have about participating in communion at another faith based church, such as, "Why does the Catholic Church seem to take communion more seriously than the Protestant church?" Or "I feel uncomfortable receiving communion if a priest is not present at the church I am currently attending."

I, too, felt strange, and had a difficult time participating in communion at another church. Feeling this way is the result of retaining several deeply embedded beliefs from our past, blocking us from accepting what Jesus intended for everyone. In chapter ten, as our journey continues, you will discover, as I did, what these obstacles are and the reasons why it is no longer necessary to embrace them.

CHAPTER TEN

A MEAL TO REMEMBER

He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19).

Going out to eat dinner is an occasion to relax, socialize and enjoy each other’s company. In America, going out to eat with a friend or loved one is a social event, an excuse to get out of the normal routine of our hurried lives and enjoy the pleasurable opportunity it provides to unwind as we catch up with personal or daily proceedings.

If on a date, it is likely you would go to a restaurant for dinner, giving both of you a chance to talk or become acquainted in a pleasant surrounding, if you have the money. Around the table where there is food, thousands of dollars have been made from business deals conducted over lunch or dinner. In today’s fast-paced commercial world, you meet business associates whenever and wherever it’s convenient, including breakfast. It is a common practice. In fact, in Mexico between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., business breakfasts are common. They take place in fine restaurants where business deals are firmed up or closed over a business breakfast.

If you have ever been on a cruise, there is a high probability you were seated at dinner with someone you never met before, although by the end of the voyage, you may have become good friends or, at the least, good acquaintances. You have learned how long your companions have been married, what they do for a living, all about their children and what part of the country they lived in. Maybe you’ve even exchanged emails to keep in touch after the cruise. When you think about it, coming around a table to share a meal with other people is a time for friends to gather, converse and share what you have in common.

For Catholics, going to church on Sunday mornings is similar. For example, receiving communion, *the bread and wine*, is the heart of the mass for the faithful. The sole reason for attending church on Sunday mornings is to receive the bread and wine as part of a group of people. This is also an important time at the Protestant church, although it is not the heart of the service.

The name of the service or assembly time in which the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist (*eucharist* is the Greek word for thanksgiving) is consecrated is called the liturgy or mass. In general, “liturgy” means a “work done for the Lord.” For the Catholic churchgoers Mass is formal and defined. The liturgy makes use of (1.) readings from the Bible--the Word of God, (2.) prayers based on the Bible, (3.) spiritual songs, (4.) sacred actions, signs or symbols including ceremonies and (5.) extemporaneous prayers of the individual community. (1)

I sat down with my younger brother Michael, who had been a Roman Catholic priest for eight years, and asked him to explain, in his own words, the mass and why present-day Catholics in America go to church.

He said, “The celebration of the Eucharist, which focuses on the redemptive mysteries of Christ is the reason people go to Mass. To remember and celebrate Christ’s saving actions as well as to draw strength to make Christ present and active in their daily lives. What happens within that hour is the community uniting around one big, Eucharistic table, identifying with one another and gaining strength toward leading positive Christian lives. The homily explains the readings from the Bible along with its historical and cultural significance. Using stories, current events and examples from human experiences, the priest tries to deliver a sermon that applies the scriptures to everyday life situations. The faithful are encouraged to identify with the message and live that message in their daily lives.”

He went on to explain, “The mass, through the use of symbols, signs, words and actions, is a ritual that makes Christ present among the community. It builds up and sends forth the faithful into the world to be Christ for one another through actions of love and service.”

After finishing with his answer, he gave me the impression that I’d made him quite nervous answering as if he recited from a text book: nevertheless, I continued with another question. I was curious to understand and get an unwavering, firsthand response about the transubstantiation, so I asked, “How would you describe the transubstantiation in your own words?”

He said, “Through the actions of the priest, accompanied by the prayers of the faithful, the substance of the bread and wine are consecrated and changed into the body and blood of Christ, while the appearances of bread and wine remain. The Eucharist is both a sacrament and a sacrifice. Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, giving thanks and sacrificing His life to God on our behalf. Through the sacrament of the Eucharist, He continues to communicate the graces merited to us on Calvary. The Eucharist is recognized as a community meal in which the participants know that the risen Lord is in their midst.”

I asked, “Do you believe the bread and wine actually turn into Jesus’s body and blood?”

“Yes I do,” he said.

Although he is my brother and I respect him and his belief, Michael’s answers did not correspond to what I learned from my research, and achieved nothing to change my apprehension regarding the transubstantiation. When I attended mass, however, at the point when the bread and wine were changed into Jesus’s body and blood, I was to worship the Eucharist. The priest’s changing the bread and wine into Jesus’s body and blood was the reason, as a Catholic, I attended mass and received the Holy Communion from the priest. Having been taught that Jesus is re-represented by the bread and wine,

which is being re-sacrificed for those who attend and receive communion, it was therefore crucial that we as faithful Catholics went to mass every Saturday or Sunday morning.

The act of the transubstantiation had been debatable in my mind for a long time. In high school, I began to consider the transubstantiation as only a symbol, not actually Christ being re-sacrificed, or His body and blood being the bread and wine at the altar. In believing this, however, I surprisingly discovered I had been sinning according to what the church teaches; when I attended mass on Sundays, I was sinning because I no longer accepted that the bread and wine were actually turned into Christ's body and blood right in front of me.

My quandary was that I received communion at mass, but because I did not believe in the transubstantiation, I was still sinning in the eyes of the Church. Discovering this disturbed me a great deal but I could not relate to the ability of a priest, bishop, cardinal, or even a Pope to turn bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus. In my mind, they were merely men. How could such an act belong to any human? They were men, as I was, even though I held all of them in high regard as religious people.

I do not care to boast about this fact, but in my younger adult life I neglected mass on Sunday mornings and only attending occasionally. But in truth, I was not the only person missing mass for one reason or another, or who did not believe in the transubstantiation. As you can see from the article "The Ten Most Common Liturgical Abuses and Why They're Wrong" by Kevin Johnson, featured in *This Rock* magazine from Catholic Answers, only twenty-five percent of Americans who call themselves Catholic attend Mass regularly--down from seventy percent before the liturgical reforms following Vatican II. In addition, close to two-thirds of American Catholics say they do not believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and many of those are among the twenty-five percent who still attend Mass today." (2.)

I discovered that I had been sinning on two fronts according to the Church. One, I choose not to attend mass every Sunday. Two, I did not agree with the transubstantiation. My heart sank thinking of all of those people who may be in this same situation but were unaware of it.

I had been caught in a venomous circle, but not cognizant of that fact until I did my research. Not going to a priest for penance was considered sinning, because I was not practicing the sacrament of penance, in-turn I was not allowed to receive communion for that reason. I was also sinning by Church's doctrine because I did not believe in the transubstantiation but received communion anyway. This raised two major concerns for me: first, what are the existing Catholic faithful doing if they do not believe in the transubstantiation and still receive communion? Second, what are former Catholics doing about receiving communion if they are attending a protestant church?

Don't worry, if you are one of the Catholic faithful who was unaware that you are sinning because you did not believe in the transubstantiation, by church law you have not sinned

yet because you simply were not knowledgeable of this fact. However, now that you are aware, take time and examine what you do and do not believe. I found all the dogma became increasingly confusing. You may need to consider if you will go to confession or will you continue to receive communion? These and many other questions you will need to answer for yourself.

For the former Catholics who are currently attending a protestant church and acted as I did, by not accepting communion at service because a priest was not present; the question I want to address is, "Why are we former Catholics so hung up on not taking communion when attending another church?" I believe that we are missing the whole point by being misinformed.

I, too, at one time, was apprehensive when the communion tray came around to me as I attended Northeast Christian Church. My wife would hand me the bread and juice tray and without hesitating for a moment, I quickly passed it on to the next person. I had no intention of participating in a protestant communion. I had been dwelling in the past, unwilling to let go of the tradition ingrained in me. Although that strong defiance made me feel embarrassed, not wanting anyone noticing I was not participating.

After several weeks of attending church and passing along the communion tray, Genora finally asked point- blank, "Why do you pass on the communion tray and not participate?"

Not wanting to admit that I was still hanging onto the rituals and my inner feeling of being a Catholic, I said simply, "It doesn't feel the same."

The following Sunday, as I passed the communion tray to the person next to me, I began to wonder if my pride of being a Catholic was the real reason for my not taking communion. I sat and thought to myself, *if I did not consider the true presence of Christ was in the Eucharist itself, then why would I not go ahead and receive communion at a protestant church?* What was holding me back? Struggling with all of the dogma from my background, the teachings and beliefs I grew up with continued to have a tight grip on me. Having something so influential with me since a few weeks after birth is tremendously difficult to let go of; however, I was not alone in my feelings or actions. After hearing from many people who came from the Catholic background, their reactions were similar to mine about receiving communion at a Protestant church.

I decided to dig a little deeper to find the reason behind my actions, partly because I was so embarrassed of passing the tray every week without partaking. Humbling myself, I finally asked for help and learned there is no place in the Bible that states a priest needs to be present for us to receive communion. Learning this, I wondered what I was trying to prove to myself. Could it be that I was afraid of breaking away from the norms of Catholicism, where a Catholic may celebrate communion, reconciliation, and anointing of the sick only from a priest and only in whose church those sacraments are valid? But the heritage and laws I'd tried to follow since birth subconsciously would not permit me to let go of them.

Things did change, however, with the guidance of Bob Cherry when he encouraged me simply to read the Bible and ask questions. I was able to find the answers regarding communion at a Protestant church service. As I stated earlier, Jesus said, "This is my body given for you: Do this in remembrance of me." "*Do this in remembrance of me*" is the key phrase here. Christ explains that each time I receive communion, I am to remember that He died for my sins. For that reason, the real question is, why not participate in communion at a Protestant church, if by doing so I am remembering His death? This would be the most obvious consideration toward Jesus I could perform. The answer had become much clearer to me, and making excuses such as, "Without the priest being present, it is not the same," or, "The small pieces of hard bread look nothing like the rounded hosts I used," undoubtedly no longer applied.

The bread and wine at the Last Supper--which we call communion--is a symbol to remember what Jesus did on the cross. He wanted us to remember Him, whether the bread we ate was small, large, round, or square. When we drink the communion cup, wine does not need to be involved. Juice, water, or even lemonade would be fine. Do not miss Jesus's point of remembering Him by the justification of the exact emblems. What good is receiving communion if you fail to remember Jesus on the cross, as He asked?

I don't mean to go deep with this but what is important is that communion is remembering His selfless act of dying for each one of us, a self-sacrificing act of love, which none of us truly deserves, but by participating in communion--no matter where we attend church--is a solemn and personal time for all of us to go to Jesus for remembrance, reflection and giving thanks for His grace.

I found that the protestant church does bring reverence to communion time in different ways, by the words on the video screens (if they are present), by the softly reflective music, or the silence. But far more important, it is those people who are actually receiving communion and doing what Jesus had asked that brings reverence to communion. Remembering His death, silently telling God how we feel and where we have failed Him. During this time, people reflect and pray. Communion is more than a life audit; here we seek a true spiritual union with God.

I was not taken back by some of the statements people made in the "Growing up Catholic" classes. I related exactly to what the participants were saying. I heard comments such as, "Communion did not seem as spiritual in a Protestant church to me," or, "The protestant church does not regard communion as seriously as we do in the Catholic Church," and, "The reverence of the service is not there for me at a Protestant church."

True, differences cannot be overlooked at a Protestant church. Ever since I could remember, the Catholic priest wore brightly colored garments on Sunday that made him look reverent. In addition, the mysticism that surrounded the mass itself created a sense of deep spiritual awareness.

As for the Protestant church not taking communion seriously, we as Catholics had so many rituals to follow, it blinded our thinking to the point of believing that the Protestant church was not serious about communion. As an example, we saw lit candles and holy water as we entered the church. Statues of Mary and Joseph stood in view, and we identify with them, along with colorful stained-glass windows, as the sharp smell of incense filled the inside of the church.

We received communion from the priest in specific ways. If you remember in the early days, we never touched the host ourselves. We walked up to the priest who placed the host on our tongue for us. We were taught that God's gift is something that we receive, not something we reach out and grab. The altar boy or girl held the gold round disk under our chin; if the host fell, it could not land on the floor because it was actually the body of Christ. Tradition has changed a great deal; now we are able to remove the host with our own hand as the priest places it in our palm; then we pick the host up, placing it into our own mouth.

All of the rites, gestures, rituals, the burning of incense and reverence have a tendency to make a person imagine that taking communion at a Protestant church is not sacred; this is completely false thinking on our part. No doubt, by attending a Protestant church things are different; however, communion is a reverent time at a protestant church, in spite of the bread's looking different and people not getting up from their seats to receive communion from a priest. But there are times in Protestant churches when the communicants get up to receive the bread and drink from a cup of juice or wine. If you open your mind to God's teachings and truly listen, the answers about taking communion at another church will come unmistakably. You will know in your heart what is right. The Catholic Church and Protestant churches actually have many beliefs in common.

The next time you are sitting in church thinking about passing up the communion tray because it is not a Catholic mass, contemplate the things that both faiths believe in:

1. God is the creator of heaven and earth.
2. The purpose of life is to know and love God.
3. Jesus is the Lord and Savior.
4. The Bible is the inspired word of God.
5. The Trinity is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
6. God became human in Jesus through the incarnation.
7. Grace is necessary for salvation.
8. Jesus asked all of us to remember His death on the cross by taking bread as a symbol of His body, and taking the juice--or wine--as the symbol of His blood.

The laity is responsible for knowing the laws about texts, gestures, the sacred objects used and the proper conduct of the mass, obeying those laws and seeing that the clergy obey them, too. I found myself asking which laws--God's law or man's law?

When answering this question, it became obvious to me that we only need God's word and God's law, not the laws of theologians. This includes the correct way to receive

communion and remembering Jesus's death on the cross. The colorful garments, the holy water, the statues, the gestures, and so on are insignificant and unnecessary when making a decision at another church to receive communion and remembering what Jesus did.

Knowing Christ loved me enough to die for me and not hold me accountable for a ritual, but instead, hold me accountable for remembering His death made the difference in my backward thinking.

Believing I could not participate in communion because I was not in a familiar surrounding where I was expected to follow particular procedures was exceedingly selfish of me. Communion is between a person and God. When we brought man into the picture, it clouded our union with Him. What is stopping you from gaining so much by participating in a merger with Christ the next time you receive the communion tray at church?