

Corpus Christi

Many people have walked away from the Catholic Church in the past forty years. Indeed, whenever I talk to contemporaries and ask whether or not their children are still Catholics, the answer is often no. This is not a happy situation and can discourage us who remain Catholic. Therefore, we have to balance this bad news by listening to good news from other parts of the world, for example, Africa, where the Catholic Church is growing.

But when people walk away from the Catholic Church, they walk away from a way of life, although that may be less true for younger people than for older people. In fact, that may be one of the reasons why younger people are walking away. The Catholicism they learned from their parents was less a way of life than it was for their parents, that is, for people now in their sixties and up, who went to the local parish school and whose friends and neighbors were almost all Catholic. But these same people often moved to a suburb where there wasn't a Catholic school and where their neighbors were not all Catholic. And so the Catholicism their children experienced was less a way life. They went to church and CCD once a week. But their school was a public school and their friends were not all Catholics. In short, while their parents grew us

in a Catholic world, they did not. That made it easier for them to leave the Church. After all, it was only a matter of one hour on Sunday and one hour in CCD in their early years.

Is there a way back? Can we reverse suburban flight? Can we make Catholic education more affordable for more Catholic parents? Or how else can we make our faith a way of life for future generations here in this country and in the other countries of the developed world?

Perhaps the most fundamental way we have of stopping this leakage is to preach more clearly what kind of God we Catholics believe in. Maybe some of us and some of the generations following us have had a negative image of the Church because of a negative image we have of God Himself. Every now and then we meet people who tell horror stories about the cruel nuns they had in school who beat them. And it will take generations, yes, generations, for our church to recover from the clergy sexual abuse cases because it is so awful and has damaged the reputation of the clergy of our church, priests and bishops, and, for some, even the pope. But what is our image of God? Can it erase the memory of cruel nuns and priest abusers? It can, but it will take time. Our image of God is, quite simply, the image of Jesus. Jesus reveals to

us who God is, what God is like. And look what we find about Jesus when we look at today's readings. Look at the Gospel. Look first of all at the disciples in this Gospel story. For a change, they come off well in this episode. They are concerned about the people who have been listening to Jesus all day because they are in a remote area and there is no market nearby to buy food for them. And what does Jesus say to them? "You feed them," he says. "We don't have enough to do that," they tell him. He persists: "Have them sit down." And then he feeds them with the little the disciples had with them, and it is enough.

The message is clear. Jesus feeds us, even miraculously. In doing so Jesus is telling us that this is what his Father is like. God is a feeder. This is the most basic message of our faith. God is generous, God is good, God is like good parents who feed their children, who provide for their children in every way they possibly can. And that is why a believer in Jesus and the God of Jesus can go through life with absolute trust and confidence. God will take care of me. That is good news. Have we heard it? Do we live it? Have we preached it to the next generation by the way we live our daily lives?

Look now at the second reading where Paul passes on to us what he learned from those who believed in Jesus before he did, namely, that Jesus, on the night before he died, while at supper with his friend, gave them bread and identified it for them as his body, that is, his very self, given up for them. He was anticipating his capture and crucifixion. And he said it was “for them.” And he did the same thing with the wine of that meal, identifying it as his very blood, that is, his very self, poured out for them. Just as a good parent would sacrifice his or her life for a child, so Jesus is telling us here that he and the Father sacrifice themselves for us.

The word sacrifice is a hard word. We think of soldiers dying in battle in horrible ways. They sacrifice their lives for their country, as is going on right now by our troops in Afghanistan. The number of dead has now reached a thousand. We ought to pray for a quick end of this war and the safe return of our troops. But sacrifice in itself is beautiful. It means that a person goes beyond his or her own good to serve the good of others. The person who sacrifices is the generous person who has a purpose and meaning in life and is willing to give his or her life for that purpose, for that meaning. That is the image which Jesus here gives of himself. He is willing to sacrifice himself for our good. And this image continues the previous image he gave us in today’s gospel of himself and his

Father. They are like good parents who not only feed their children but are even willing to sacrifice their own lives for the good of their children.

This is what we celebrate today on this Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord. May we interiorize this message so that our own lives become lives of feeding and sacrificing for others! And may our lives lived in this way help our children to find their way back to our church!