

SHARE IN 'BIG EVENT' WITH JESUS EVERY SUNDAY



One of the 2014 Archdiocesan Synod priorities is understanding the Mass. Catholic Herald Family, working with the synod implementation evangelization and Sunday Mass pastoral priority team, is publishing a six-part series designed to help parents teach their children about the Mass. This fourth part opens the discussion of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

I'm about to tell you something personal. It involves something my husband is still sensitive about, so if you see him, don't let on that you know, OK?

On May 21, 1995, a gloriously sunny day, I graduated with my bachelor's degree. The commencement ceremony was a big deal to me; in addition to receiving my diploma, I also got to take the stage to sing the National Anthem and Alma Mater. My family travelled over 400 miles to attend.

What's more, the ceremony happened to be six days before my wedding. My soon-to-be-husband was graduating the same day, with his master's degree. So much to celebrate! Neither my fiancé nor I owned a cell phone, so we simply agreed on a place to meet outside the arena.

At the appointed time, my family and I waited for David. And waited. The glaring sunshine became uncomfortably warm. At last, David appeared, but with no cap and gown. He looked terrible. He was suffering from a debilitating migraine, managing to haul himself over to the arena only after he felt sure he was done vomiting.

He had missed the entire ceremony.

To be perfectly honest, I was angry with him for missing my big day. Eventually, though, my selfishness subsided; I felt terrible about his illness and understood why he had missed graduation. Nonetheless, my heart felt sad that I never shared the big event with him personally.

Jesus must feel something like this when we miss Sunday Mass. Jesus skips over the selfishness that I initially felt, of course. In his tremendous mercy, Jesus immediately understands our weakness and

complicated lives. I imagine how he looks at us with love – and also sadness – as he sees us somewhere other than his church each weekend.

The analogy of my commencement to the Lord's Supper doesn't come close to what Jesus does for us and how much he longs for us to be at Sunday Mass. In every celebration of the Mass, we recall the way Jesus offered himself to us. He didn't protect his body from harm, but spilled his blood for us, even giving these physical gifts to us as actual food and drink.

The Bible puts it simply: "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" Lk 22:19.

Jesus himself asks us to remember his sacrifice, but not as spectators. No, the church invites us to imitate Jesus, to come to Mass and offer ourselves as well.

In the liturgy, the Preparation of the Gifts dramatically reminds us why each one of us – even our children – is important. Where do the gifts of bread and wine come from? From God, originally yes, but from where in the church?

They come from the congregation. And regular folks from the pews bring the gifts up to the altar.

A friend who spent time in Togo, Africa last winter was deeply moved by the Preparation of the Gifts in that community's liturgies. Every member of the church brings up a personal gift, usually food from their land, as part of the procession. As they bring their gifts to the altar, they dance. Each person's dance is unique, too, highlighting how unrepeatable we are.

Our neighborhood church cultures might not include dancing in the offertory, but if we pay attention, we'll recognize our very bodies are gifts we can offer to God. As we watch the bread, wine, and donations of food and money make their way to the altar, we can imagine ourselves making the journey up the aisle.

Jesus, in the person of the priest, waits for us there. Jesus accepts our gifts. He blesses them and shares them with the world. At every sacrifice of the Mass, Jesus accepts us, blesses us, and strengthens us. Jesus longs for us to be with him intimately in this way each weekend, and we need the strength only he can provide in this way, in the Eucharist.

(Grace is director of children's ministry for the Apostleship of Prayer and author of "Pray with Me: Seven Simple Ways to Pray with Your Children" (Ave Maria Press.)

Action steps:

■ **Whisper!** Help your children pay attention to the Presentation of the Gifts, Preparation of the Altar, and Prayer over the Offerings. Quietly invite them to take in what the priest and congregation are doing.

■ **Imagine!** Imagine yourself sitting or lying on the altar, being offered as a gift to God. Jesus, the priest, stands at the altar, looking at you with love. Have a conversation with Jesus about what you want to give him.

■ **Offer!** Realize how pre-cious you are to the Lord. God has given you gifts like no other person in the world. Bring these gifts to him each Sunday at Mass, and share them all week long with others.

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