

The Body and Blood of Christ. A June 27, 2011 – Fr. Gerald Haemmerle

Paul Wilkes is one of my favorite Catholic writers. He has written over 20 books, but my current favorite is his most recent one entitled *Holding God in my Hands*. He has led a most unusually life, a graduate of Cathedral Latin in Cleveland, Marquette University and Columbia University, briefly a Trappist monk, a sinner, a fallen away Catholic for a time. But he returned to the church with much vigor, and once a week, on Thursdays, he is an extraordinary minister of holy communion in the local hospital. His recent book recounts that experience.

He begins by talking about the Catholic Church's beliefs about the Eucharist. We do believe in the real presence, that Jesus is present, body and blood, soul and divinity, in the bread consecrated by the priest at Mass. There are lots of theological explanations of how that happens, like transubstantiation. But the bottom line is that we believe in the real presence because of the words of Jesus in the Scriptures, He said "This is my body, this is my blood, do this in my memory." In our gospel today he reinforces that message, he said "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever." We believe it because the Catholic Church has always taught that. Most of the other Christian denominations do not accept that, they believe in the symbolic presence, but not the real presence.

In his book there are about 20 small chapters, all relating an encounter with a patient in the hospital, a mother and her son dying of aids, a woman, divorced and alone and somewhat bitter at life, a Mexican immigrant who has not been to church in years, and others. In almost every case, when he offers them the Eucharist, there is a healing, there is a peace that comes upon them.

I really don't have to report on a book to tell stories of this experience. Here at St. Charles, we have those who take communion to the hospitals, Kettering and Miami Valley, and we have many who take communion to the homebound, they all have stories to tell. And we have over 100 extraordinary ministers who at our weekend masses. And I can tell my own stories, for I have been giving communion to those in hospitals, to the homebound, to parishioners at St. Charles and many other parishes for over 40 years. In fact, I go back to the time when only the priest administered communion.

I think of Suzie, who went through our RCIA program some years ago. I often ask them why they decided to become Catholic. The answers vary, some because their spouse and children were Catholic, some because of the Christian example of their neighbors, who have an inner strength from their faith that they lack. Suzie was different. She had taken her previous faith seriously. She frequently read the bible, and from that reading became convinced that our Lord was truly present in the Eucharist. Her church did not believe that, only the Catholic faith did, and so she felt she had to join that church. She cherishes the moment each Sunday when she receives communion.

There is Will. He was a life long Catholic, but in recent years he became disenchanted with the Catholic Church. Part of it was the sexual abuse scandal, part of it was a backward trend in the church, part of it might have been boredom. He started to go to one of the mega-churches. At first he was pleased, he still heard the scriptures read, the singing was more enthusiastic, the preaching better, and they got a good cup of coffee every Sunday before the service. But something was missing. They did not offer communion, they did not believe in the real presence. Will missed that very much, even though he had often taken it for granted. He returned to the Catholic Church, and truly appreciates taking God in his hand and receiving the Eucharist every Sunday.

Finally there are all of you, hundreds, even thousands, who come here every Sunday to hold God in your hand or on your tongue, to be healed and comforted by Him, to be nourished for the journey of life. What a great gift God has given to us. On this feast of Corpus Christi, The Body and Blood of the Lord, may we give thanks to God for that great gift. May we never take that gift for granted.