

## ***Being Catholic: From Ritual to Reality***

*Every Sunday morning, members of St. Swithin's Church gather for the celebration of the Eucharist. They are a rather diverse group.*

*Ralph thinks the bishops are human and that they are doing the best they can in the face of the many critical issues in the church. Jack is furious with the bishops' arrogance and their uncompromising attitudes on those issues.*

*Joan faithfully leads the rosary before every Sunday Mass. Helen gauges her arrival at Mass on Sunday to avoid it.*

*Marian thinks that priests should marry if they choose. Frank and Sally firmly support priestly celibacy. Kurt thinks there is nothing wrong with women being priests.*

*Rick thinks their pastor is the greatest priest on earth. Jim cringes every time their pastor goes to the pulpit.*

*George and Laurie question the direction in which this Pope is taking the church. Randi and Tony believe the Pope is breath of fresh air, not unlike John XXIII.*

*Ken would like his parish to offer the Latin Mass. Will and Joyce are upset with what they consider the current liturgical backtracking.*

*Bill and Phyliss love and support their gay son and his partner. John thinks that gays are destroying the family.*

Will the real **Catholic** please stand up! At this point everyone at St. Swithin's should stand up.

Like it or not, that is the face of Catholicism, and though we might not agree with one or the other of the members of the St. Swithin's community or in our own parish family, we should never question their faith. This isn't slipping into "relativism." It is, however, an admission that the Body of Christ in the Twenty-first Century is capable of coming to their own conclusions about the issues facing them and their church.

St. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians is also addressed to us. The issues are far more complex than in that first century of the church. But the twenty centuries following that letter should have taught us that Christianity, though established by the Son of God, is made up of human beings, and so that church will fail and that church will triumph. It's part of the journey. It's who we are.

What is essential is the death and resurrection of the Son of God who came, as the Gospel today proclaims,

*that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet  
might be fulfilled:  
[that] the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light,  
on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death  
light has arisen.*

Both the prophecy of Isaiah and the message and mission of the Christ are clearly intended to be inclusive. The Good News is that God's love embraces all. For all our diversity as Christians and as Catholics, we are one in Christ, one in our belief that what is essential is that we "love God and love our neighbor as ourselves." He said it. We say we believe it. How do we live it? As Christians we have been challenged not to be in the business of judging: "do not judge that you might not be judged." He said it. We say believe him. How do we live it? Recall Pope Francis' now famous statement about gays: "Who am I to judge?"

As we traditionally pray at this time of year for unity among all Christians, we could easily, and more appropriately, begin by praying for the unity of Roman Catholics! That prayer is not and should not be a prayer for uniformity, but rather for a reasoned unity in diversity. After all, the word *catholic* means universal, inclusive. We have to admit that it is very difficult in this age of knee-jerk reactions, exacerbated by instant communication, to exercise thoughtful and reasoned dialog on any even mildly controversial topic. There can be no unity with division, but diversity can lead to a more compassionate, inclusive, and welcoming church.

There is no reason for Rick and Jim not to be able to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist in joyful union, regardless of their opinion of their pastor. Joan's and Helen's attitude towards praying the rosary should be no impediment to embracing the Body of Christ in the Eucharist and therefore one another.

We just concluded a week of praying for Christian Unity. With the largest religious denomination in the United States said to be *former Catholics*, it's time for some prayer and action on behalf of the unity of Catholics. There is no better time and place for both than at this Sunday Eucharist.

Let's remember that when we embrace one another at the Greeting of Peace at Mass today and let that ritual become a reality.