

**This first article appears on the Web site of ARCC, the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church.**

### **Feed (some) of My People!**

Our Catholic Church holds that there can be no interdenominational agreement on receiving the Eucharist before full ecclesiastical unity is achieved. Too often, this is equated with another matter, that of Eucharistic sharing, the act of making the Eucharist accessible to individuals of other traditions who are, by virtue of baptism, our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, and who are present for the Eucharistic celebration, whether as occasional visitors or as spouses of the nearly 50% of Catholics in North America who have married across denominational lines.

This lack of Eucharistic sharing between believing and prepared Christians makes a mockery of the theology of sacrament which says a sacrament effects what it signifies. If the Eucharist is the ultimate sacrament of unity, should it not be allowed to effect that unity as well as signify it? Should it not be more generously shared with properly disposed persons of faith who by special circumstances find themselves at a Catholic liturgy and ask to share the Body and Blood of Jesus with this us? In asking this, do they not meet all the criteria specified in the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism, [Article 131](#), as well as [Canon 844, Article 4](#) of the Code of Canon Law - a law too often required to be obeyed, too seldom generously applied?

Must we continuously tell such people of good faith that we are sorry but they cannot receive, cannot be healed by the ultimate sacrament of healing, cannot live the unity of their marriage at the Eucharistic banquet, cannot be united with us (and we with them) by the ultimate sacrament of unity? Must we wait until such unity is officially proclaimed before we offer food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty?

Eucharist is not a prize for some theological winning team or some favored team member. It is food for the journey. And we all journey together: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God who is Father of all. No Christian tradition has complete control over Eucharist. Regardless of our interpretation, it is still Eucharist, the sharing of the bread/wine/body/blood of Jesus that He gave us to be again become a living, resurrected, presence amongst us.

If Jesus commands this in His memory, who can make rules against it? A thought to pray about during Lent!

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**The following article appeared in *Commonweal* magazine (and on their Web site at <http://commonwealmagazine.org>). Visit the *Commonweal* Web site to [subscribe](#).**

### **The Reunion**

William F. Powers

Cocktail in hand, I walked up to a group of three of my classmates at the gathering that marked the fiftieth anniversary of our ordination as priests. As I joined these men with whom I had spent six years of my youth, one of them, Frank, asked, "Have you had heart bypass surgery?" Taken aback by the question, I answered that I had not. With a mixture of pride and resignation, he said, "The three of us have."

Along with the fifteen other men in the dining room of the Immaculate Conception Center in Queens, New York, we four had knelt in 1959 before a now-deceased bishop, dedicating our lives to the service of the church in the dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre. At the time, we couldn't see fifty weeks ahead, let alone fifty years. We certainly never anticipated the changes in the church that would pull the rug from beneath our feet.

Although most were assigned to parishes upon ordination, a few of us were first sent to Puerto Rico to study Spanish. On our return we became "Spanish priests," stumbling through Masses, baptisms, confessions, and weddings in that unfamiliar tongue. Whatever our assignment, we were all confident that we would serve the church as priests with humble, obedient fidelity for the remainder of our lives. Some of us did; others, like me, removed the Roman collar after a number of years and ventured into the world of marriage, parenthood, and second careers.

Of the nineteen men at our reunion, ten had remained active as priests. Three of them live right there in the retired priests' wing of a fortress-like building designed to house college-level seminarians. The marble floors echoed with the hum of motorized wheelchairs, as priests no longer able to walk maneuvered their way through the dark corridors.

We didn't discuss the long-ago process, often difficult and lengthy, by which some of us left the ministerial priesthood. Those of us who married—many of us grandparents now—are at peace with our decision. We have encountered our own problems along the way, of course. One man mourns the loss of his wife; another suffered the sorrow of divorce. One, in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, spent the evening smiling and asking us the same questions over and over again. Likewise, those who remained active priests seem at peace. The reunion was a special moment to recall what bound us to one another—*fratres in unum*—not what divided us. We shared memories of those days of our youth when we had studied, prayed, and played together in the seminary. Although many of us have journeyed along unanticipated paths, the idealism of our early twenties, tempered by experience, has not been extinguished, even now in our seventies.

Before the cocktail hour and an elegant dinner, we gathered around the altar in a small chapel in the basement of the building; there were too few of us for the large worship center upstairs. The "active" priests, vested in white liturgical garb, were interspersed in the semicircle with the "resigned" priests dressed in jackets and ties. As we reached the high point of the Mass, the active priests pronounced the words of consecration aloud; the rest of us, from force of habit and continuing faith, said them in our hearts.

At the kiss of peace, we walked around embracing one another. For many, it was

likely the last time. Of the forty men who were ordained in 1959, fifteen have died. One who had planned to attend the reunion was hospitalized just that morning. Two could not attend because of advanced cancer.

Each year, the number of men celebrating their golden jubilee will continue to dwindle. Only four men were ordained to the priesthood on Long Island last year, and three for Brooklyn, two of them in their fifties. We could speculate as to the reasons for the decline; those of us who left in order to marry know one of them. But our reunion was not a time to debate mandatory celibacy or lament changing demographics. We came together, fifty years on, to celebrate the twin mysteries of God's goodness and enduring friendship.

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**John Chuchman recommends the following link:**

<http://www.womenpriests.org/index.asp>

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**Fr. James Martin, S.J., is the culture editor of *America* magazine. This article is an edited excerpt from his new book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, available from HarperOne, which appeared in *America*. You can subscribe to *America* online.**

### **God Is Ready Are you?**

When I entered the Jesuit novitiate, I was baffled about what it meant to have a "relationship" with God. We novices heard about that a great deal, and I was stumped: What was I supposed to do to relate to God? What did that mean? My biggest misconception was that I would have to change before approaching God. Like many beginners in the spiritual life, I felt that I wasn't worthy to approach God. So I felt foolish trying to pray. I confessed this to the assistant novice director. "What do I need to do before I can relate to God?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "God meets you where you are."

That was a liberating insight. Even though God is always calling us to constant conversion and growth, and even though we are imperfect and sometimes sinful people, God loves us as we are now. As the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello said, "You don't have to change for God to love you." This is one of the main insights of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: We are loved even in our imperfections.

The Christian can see this most clearly in the New Testament. Jesus often calls people to conversion, to cease sinning, to change their lives, but he does not wait until they have done so before meeting them. He enters into relationship with them as he finds them. He meets them where they are and as they are.

But there is another way of understanding this. Not only does God desire to be in relationship with you now, but God's way of relating to you often depends on where you are in your life.

So if you find meaning primarily through relationships, this is how God may want to meet you. Look for God through friendship. Just the other day a man who comes to me for spiritual direction said that he was having a hard time being grateful. When I asked where he most found God, his face brightened and he said, "My children!"

God can meet us anywhere. One of my closest Jesuit friends is a prison chaplain named George, who has recently started giving the Spiritual Exercises to inmates in a Boston jail. Not long ago, one inmate told George that he was about to punch a guy in the face when he suddenly felt God was giving him "some time" to reconsider. Here was God meeting an inmate in his prison cell.

God also meets you in ways that you can understand, in ways that are meaningful to you. Some-times God speaks to you in a manner that is so personal, so tailored to the circumstances of your life that it is nearly impossible to explain it to others.

### **Félicité's Bird**

One of my favorite instances of this in fiction is in Gustave Flaubert's luminous short story "A Simple Heart," written in 1877, which tells the tale of a poor servant named Félicité.

For many years Félicité, a goodhearted young woman, patiently bears up under her grim employer, the imperious Madame Aubain. At one point in the story, Madame Aubain gives her servant a brightly colored parrot named Loulou, really the only extraordinary thing that Félicité has ever owned. (This is the eponymous bird in Julian Barnes's popular book *Flaubert's Parrot*.)

Then disaster strikes: her beloved Loulou dies. In desperation, Félicité sends the bird to a taxidermist, who stuffs him. When the bird is returned, Félicité sets it atop a large wardrobe with other holy relics that she keeps. "Every morning," writes Flaubert, "as she awoke she saw him by the first light of day, and then would recall the days gone by and the smallest details of unimportant events, without sorrow, quite serenely."

After her mistress dies, Félicité grows old and retreats into a simple life of piety. "Many years passed," writes Flaubert. Finally, at the moment of her own death, Félicité is given a strange and beautiful vision: "[W]hen she breathed her last breath she thought she saw in the heavens as they opened a gigantic parrot, hovering over her head."

God comes to us in ways we can understand.

### **In the Beauty of the Lilies**

Here is an example from my own life: At one point in my Jesuit training, I spent two years working in Nairobi, Kenya, working with the Jesuit Refugee Service. There I helped East African refugees who had settled in the city start small businesses to

support themselves. At the beginning of my stay, cut off from friends and family in the States, I felt a crushing loneliness. After a few months of hard work, I also came down with mononucleosis, which required two months of recuperation. So it was a trying time.

Happily, I worked with some generous people, including Uta, a German Lutheran lay volunteer with extensive experience in refugee work in Southeast Asia. After I had recovered from my illness, our work flourished: Uta and I helped some refugees set up about 20 businesses, including tailoring shops, several small restaurants, a bakery and even a little chicken farm. Uta and I also started a small shop that sold the refugee handicrafts. It was located in a sprawling slum in Nairobi.

It was a remarkable turnaround—from lying on my bed, exhausted, wondering why I had come here, anguished that I would have to return home, puzzled over what I could ever accomplish, to busily working with refugees from all over East Africa, managing a shop buzzing with activity and realizing that this was the happiest and freest I had ever felt. Many days were difficult. But many days I thought, “I can’t believe how much I love this work!”

One day I was walking home from our shop. The long brown path started at a nearby church on the edge of the slum, which was perched on a hill that overlooked a broad valley. From there the bumpy path descended through a thicket of floppy-leaved banana trees, thick ficus trees, orange day lilies, tall cow grass and cornfields. On the way into the valley I passed people silently working in their plots of land, who looked up and called out to me as I passed. Brilliantly colored, iridescent sunbirds sang from the tips of tall grasses. At the bottom of the valley was a little river, and I crossed a flimsy bridge to get to the other side.

When I climbed the opposite side of the hill, I turned to look back. Though it was around five in the afternoon, the equatorial sun blazed down on the green valley, illuminating the long brown path, the tiny river, the people, the banana tree, flowers and grass.

Quite suddenly I was overwhelmed with happiness. I’m happy to be here, I thought. After some loneliness, some illness and some doubts, I felt that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

It was a surprising experience. Here was God speaking to me where I was—physically, emotionally and mentally—and offering what I needed on that day. What was it, precisely? A feeling of clarity? Of longing? Of exaltation? It’s hard to say, even today. Perhaps all of those things. But it was especially meaningful to me where I was at the time.

### **Any Time, Anywhere**

God speaks to us in ways we can understand. God began to communicate with St. Ignatius during his long recuperation after sustaining injuries in a battle, when he was vulnerable and more open to listening. With me, on that day in Nairobi, God spoke to me through the view of that little valley.

God can also meet you at any time, no matter how confused your life may seem. You do not have to have a perfectly organized daily life to experience God. Your spiritual house does not need to be tidy for God to enter.

In the Gospels, for example, Jesus often meets people in the midst of their work: Peter mending his nets by the seashore, Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. But just as often Jesus encounters people when they are at their absolute worst: an adulterous woman about to be stoned, a woman who has been sick for many years, a possessed man not even in his right mind. In each of these situations God said to these busy, stressed-out, worried, frightened people, "I'm ready to meet you if you're ready to meet me."

If God meets you where you are, then where you are is a place to meet God. You do not have to wait until your life settles down, or the kids move out of the house, or you have found that perfect apartment, or you recover from that long illness. You do not have to wait until you've overcome your sinful patterns or are more "religious" or can pray "better." You do not have to wait for any of that.

God is ready now.

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