

## Why do we have to gather to worship the Lord?

A short explanation to assist parents preparing children for First Holy Communion

Community is a fundamental premise in Catholic Christianity. We even know God as a community of persons whom we call the Trinity. (See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #253-255). Jesus made it very clear from the first days of his public ministry that to follow him is to be part of a community of people. He made that clear by calling the first disciples (Matthew 4:18ff, Luke 5:1ff) and by promising that when two or three people gather together in his name, he is present (Matthew 18:20). When Jesus instituted what we now call the Mass, he was celebrating a Passover meal in community. Being together with other believers is an essential component of Christian faith.

While it is certainly both possible and laudable to spend time alone with the Lord in prayer, giving praise and adoration, listening and communing with him in such wonderful places as beaches, parks and mountains, there is a completely different and powerful experience to be had when gathering at Mass to give thanks and praise to God. As Catholic Christians, we are exhorted to do both things, but a special emphasis is given to gathering together to worship, so much so that the first basic tenet for Catholics is to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days.

What is it that is so important about gathering for Mass? Why do we have to “go to Mass?” The importance flows from Jesus’ promise to be present when two or more gather in his name. He promises a presence, and for Catholics, that promise is mightily fulfilled in our celebration of the Eucharist. Jesus is really present in this one hour in four ways, unique to this gathering, concentrated and not duplicated in other areas of our lives like it is during the Mass.

The first way Jesus is really present is in the assembly as it gathers. We are all baptized members of the Body of Christ. We’ve been scattered throughout the week. We’ve been doing our works of charity and justice. And we come now to be with the Head of the Body, for Jesus desires to eat with us, to forgive us, nourish us and send us forth again. We come, this assembly of believers, bearers of the Lord’s image, and signs of God’s presence to one another. And so as we assemble, we see the Lord in each other: joys, sorrows, kindnesses, sufferings, newborns and aging bodies all signs of the Lord’s life. He is present in us, and even more so as we all gather, one Body in Christ. Look around when you come to Mass. You’ll see Jesus in the tender care of a parent for a child, in the weary body of an elder, in the delight of a child singing a favorite song, in the unbidden tears of one who suffers. It’s Jesus, here!

The second way Jesus is really present when we gather is in the person of the priest who, in the Eucharistic assembly, is our outward sign of Christ present, gathering His people. He welcomes, he leads our prayer, he mediates our prayers to the Father, he teaches and preaches, and he gathers us around the table. There we join him, *in persona Christi capitis*, in the person of Christ, the Head of the Body as together we give thanks and praise to the Father, call down the Holy Spirit, join all the choirs of angels and saints in their unending hymn of praise, and know that heaven and earth meet in that Eucharist. He is the outward expression of that glorious promise of Jesus: to be with us when we gather. Look and listen...you’ll hear him act and sound just like Jesus, because he’s here!

The third way Jesus is really present when we gather takes place through the ministries of the Lector, the Deacon, and the Priest. In the first part of the Mass each of those people becomes the vessel through which Jesus speaks to us in the Word. He is really present when the Word is proclaimed in the assembly. In a new and different way, the Word is made flesh, right there with us. We hear Him speak to us, His brothers and sisters, His disciples, His followers, seekers, doubters, children and guests. He teaches, challenges, unites, comforts and restores **us** just as he did for those first followers. And this only happens like this when we are gathered. Listen! The Lord is speaking today, to us!

And finally, and most importantly, Jesus is really present in consecrated bread and wine. This is the most unique and most traditional understanding of real presence. What is so amazing is that in every celebration of the Eucharist, we are part of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, hovering over bread and wine, and us, transforming us into the living Body of Christ. And only during the Mass are we privileged to be part of that calling down of the Spirit, of the Lord, the Giver of life who changes the substance of bread and wine from food for our bodies to the very substance of Jesus Christ, food for our souls. Only when we gather does that same spirit flood over us, and only when we gather do we join with other believers in that intimate communion with Jesus Christ where we take Him into ourselves. Right there in every Mass, the Body becomes One with Jesus, transformed and prepared to go forth, to be Christ for the world! Deo Gratias! Thanks be to God!

Clearly there's a lot more that can be said about each of these presences. But the point here is to explain why we need to gather to worship. This is why! Jesus' promised presence in ways that only happen when we are gathered together for the Mass. No wonder we are told to get there! No wonder it's a fundamental sign of a faithful Catholic. Who would want to miss FOUR chances to encounter the Living Christ in one hour?

Written by Debbie Stollery 2-2-17 for First Holy Communion Preparation