

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel tells the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. If you listened closely to the story, you could hear our Liturgy embedded in the story. As the disciples walked toward Emmaus, they were discussing all that had happened concerning Jesus. Suddenly Jesus himself joined them and walked with them, but they did not recognize him. After they told him all that had happened, *"beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to him."* On the road, then, Jesus celebrated a Liturgy of the Word with them.

After they arrived at the village, *"when he had seated himself with them to eat, he took bread, pronounced the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them,"* and then they recognized him. Later they told the apostles all that happened on the road and *"how they had come to know him in the breaking of bread."* At dinner, then, Jesus celebrated a Liturgy of the Eucharist with them. The "breaking of bread" was the early Church's name for the Eucharist.

Today at the 10:30 a.m. Mass 21 second graders received their First Communion. Today's Gospel coupled their First Communion should cause us to remember and reflect upon our own First Communion. As my First Communion approached, I was excited because I believed with all my heart that I would be receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist for the very first time. A few days ago a parent of a First Communicant in another parish was telling me how excited her daughter was and how she was practicing receiving Communion at home. The mother then began telling me about her own First Communion here at Little Flower.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul only gave a solemn introduction to two core Christian beliefs: Jesus' death and resurrection and Jesus' institution of the Eucharist [15:3-4 & 11:23-26]. I would suggest that for Paul these were the two most important articles of faith.

If we read reports about Catholic church attendance in the United States, we realize that the number of people attending Sunday Mass regularly is declining. I wonder if this represents a crisis of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In today's Gospel, although the disciples' hearts were burning within them as Jesus interpreted the Scriptures to them, they only recognized him in the breaking of bread. We believe that it is in the Eucharist that we are enabled to recognize the Lord Jesus not only in Communion but also in Scripture, others, ourselves, and our world.

This year attendance at our Easter Sunday Masses was lower than in previous years. Since I became pastor in 2003, most years the church was completely filled during at least one of our Easter Masses. I can remember when we needed all the chairs in the gathering area and there were people in the choir loft. This Easter the church was not even filled for our 10:30 a.m. Mass! What this suggests is that even those who only attend once or twice a year are not even attending that often. I wonder if this represents a crisis of faith in the physical resurrection of Jesus and/or is another manifestation of a crisis of faith in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist.

My brothers and sisters, I have to wonder if the decline in attendance at Mass contributes to the divisions within our country as well as the increasing lack of civility within our society. I believe that shared faith leads to shared values. What is lacking in our country today is a consensus of values. As St. Paul wrote, *"Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf"* [1 Cor. 10:17].