

Thank you for being here this evening as we kick off our Lenten series on the Eucharist during this special Year of the Eucharist that we are celebrating in our diocese. In particular tonight, I would like to focus on the Symbols of the Eucharist. I would therefore like to begin with a quote on the Eucharist that Mother Teresa wrote some years back to encourage her sisters in their spiritual life: "Don't be surprised at your failure. You must connect every bit of your life with Holy Communion; all of your failures, your weaknesses, your pride, and your misery. See that, in spite of being tempted, you are not conquered."

St. Teresa of Calcutta reminds us just how central our belief in the Eucharist is to our life of faith. We may be broken, yet Christ is able to heal us and unite us in one body. As Jesus gave His Body and His Blood to His disciples at the Last Supper, it has become a way of life for all those who call themselves Catholic and Christian. The fact that the Last Supper was celebrated during the time of the Jewish Passover also means that there are many Jewish elements that can be found as part of our celebration of the Mass. Over the centuries, there are many symbols that have come to represent or stand for the Eucharist. I would like to explain and draw attention to a number of these symbols this evening so that when we see them, we don't take them for granted, but can appreciate them as a reminder of what we believe in and how we are a Eucharistic people.

I would like to begin with the symbols of the Eucharist that are in our own church building of St. Catherine. As you come into our church or any Catholic Church, the altar should be the center of attention. It is a table, one that we gather around for a meal. In art, there are many portrayals of the Last Supper. We see the disciples portrayed, trying to understand what was happening. They didn't understand what was coming next or that the Lord's Passion was about to begin. Yet in His last hours on Earth, Jesus reminds them of the importance of this moment and how they should always remember it and to do this over and over again in remembrance. This is why the altar is always central to our celebration of the Eucharist.

As the disciples gathered around the altar, Jesus used some simple everyday food and drink to help them to remember. Something ordinary would become something extraordinary. Bread and wine became something more. For what do they do? They satisfy our hunger. There's nothing like a piece of bread that will fill us up. Wine satisfies our thirst. Both of these elements were easily available to those who wanted to celebrate the Eucharist. In fact, the bread was so simple, it even has reminders of the Biblical roots of Manna in the desert that was given to the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering. Truly this food has become for us the food of everlasting life. It is symbolic of the love that God has for us but becomes much more than just a symbol. The bread that we eat, the wine that we drink, have truly become Christ himself. Even the altar itself takes on another significance and symbol. It is no longer just a table where

we sit down and eat a meal, it allows us to make a connection to the Old Testament as the altar of sacrifice. Christ himself is offered on this altar that we gather around. He has become the sacrifice.

Speaking of sacrifice and what was done in Old Testament times, we remember how animals were often offered on the altar as sacrifice to God or to the pagan gods. The priest would offer that sacrifice time and time again to make up for our sinfulness. But Christ would change all that by being offered up once and for all. A theme that we have in Christian art that reminds us of this, is a picture of a lamb. It is often portrayed in several different ways. It can be resting on a bible or the book of the Gospels. It often has a halo around the lamb's head and sometimes a banner with a Cross on it is held by the lamb, symbolizing the Resurrection. What symbol does the lamb stand for? It stands for Christ and how Christ has become for us the sacrifice, offered on the altar, the food for everlasting life.

Sometimes the disciples themselves had a hard time identifying where they saw and found symbols of the Eucharist. That was even after the three years that they had spent following Jesus around and having Jesus teach them. Yet Jesus would make it plainly evident to them. They would see how Jesus fed the 5,000 with a few fish and a few loaves of bread. Even though there were so many that were to be fed, 12 baskets were left over. Then even after the disciples experienced the Last Supper, and after Jesus rose from the dead, they still had a hard time recognizing Jesus. But as soon as Jesus broke bread with them, they immediately knew it was Him and that He was again was feeding them with His Body and His Blood. It was then that they started to understand that this was the Eucharist.

Now look above our altar. What we find is the Crucifix. There we find Jesus, on the Cross, another symbol that He has become the sacrifice on the altar. But pay attention to our Crucifix. We have some other symbols on our Cross here at St. Catherine that you don't find on every Crucifix. Where the nails pierced his hands, there is a Chalice, a cup on His right and left sides of His body. The cups are there to catch every drop of blood that spills out of His body. Now you might wonder who the hands belong to. These hands belong to angels from Heaven that are seeking to catch the Blood of Christ. It shows us how precious the Body and Blood of Christ are, how this is something that is not ordinary, but something that is extraordinary. We can see then how, through the many centuries, how Christians have been taught how sacred the Bread and Wine, that has become the Body and the Blood, are to us. Not one drop of wine, not one morsel of bread are meant to be wasted but are to be consumed and taken fully into our bodies. In fact, the representation of our Crucifix here at St. Catherine was not uncommon portrayal of the Cross in 14th century Italy. Fast forward to what we do at Mass today. That is why you see such attention placed on cleaning the vessels that we use at Mass or shortly after Mass is over. Not a drop of the consecrated bread or wine escapes us. It is heavenly food, the bread of Angels. In the similar way, when one listens to the Passion of our Lord or meditates on the Stations of the Cross, in artwork that portrays the Stations of the Cross, one often sees a

soldier piercing the side of Christ with a spear. Out flows blood and water. That is why at Mass one sees the priest or the deacon adding water to the chalice as the chalice is prepared at the offertory. The water stands for the people, the wine stands for Christ. When water and wine are mixed together in the Chalice, the people are united with Christ and recalls the mystery where water and blood flowed from the side of Christ. As it is written in our Catechism of the Catholic Church: “In the Eucharist, the Church is as it were at the foot of the Cross with Mary, united with the offering and intercession of Christ.” When we gather around the altar in this Church, we are literally at the foot of the Cross and become part of that symbol as well.

One of the interesting things about some of our symbols that are used in the Eucharist are that they are sometimes off to the side or are hidden. For example, did you know, at the base of our Crucifix, there are relics such as St. Catherine and a relic of the Cross? You will need to come around to the backside of the Crucifix to see them. These relics of the Saints remind us of the connection of our faith to those who have gone before us. Throughout the world, many of our altars that we offer Mass upon, also have relics of the Saints imbedded in a special stone right where the priest celebrates Mass. Then if you have been to St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the main altar is actually built over the tomb and the bones of St. Peter. Each time we celebrate Mass, we are celebrating it with the Saints!

As Christ is offered on the altar, though the Bread and Wine which become His Body and Blood, look at the way our sanctuary is laid out and what is right behind the altar. It is our Blessed Sacrament Chapel. On the pillars, on either side of the entrance to the chapels, we find two angels, or in this case, two archangels. This gateway to the Blessed Sacrament is supposed to remind us of the Garden of Eden and how the angels guarded this gateway and kept Adam and Eve from re-entering because of their sinfulness. But now it is different for us. This gateway is now open for us to enter because Christ was sacrificed on the altar. No longer are we to be kept from Paradise or the Eucharist and the love of God. In the center of the chapel is the tabernacle, which is in the shape of the ancient Ark of the Covenant. Once again, angels adorn the sides and stand guard over the Eucharist, kneeling in worship before the Body of Christ. Above the tabernacle hangs the sanctuary lamp or light. Whenever the Eucharist is reserved in a Catholic Church, you will find this light lit and present somewhere near the tabernacle. It draws our attention to the fact that Christ is always in our midst and still is with us today in the form of His precious Body. Our Lord is present among us and this spot in the Church is a place of prayer and one of peace. In this space, we join the angels in praying and praising God. This sanctuary light is constantly burning 24 hours a day and reminds us that Christ, in the Eucharist, is a light to the world. We therefore kneel before the Tabernacle as a sign of respect and reverence. In some ways, the Tabernacle reminds us of the intersection between Heaven and Earth and how Our Lord never abandons us or leaves us alone. Unlike the holy of holies that we hear about where Moses approached the Lord, which only a few people could enter such as Moses or the priests, we are meant to come into this holy place, knowing that we are welcome to come into the presence of God. The Tabernacle, which holds the Body of Christ, is then used

to reserve the Eucharist which is especially used to bring Communion to the sick and to the dying.

As we talk about these things, other symbols of the Eucharist are not only the sacred vessels that we use at Mass: The chalice, the ciborium, incense, but the bread and wine itself. The chalice is a sacred vessel that is made out of precious materials. This custom once again shows the sacred nature of what the chalice will contain, the Blood of Christ. In the same way, the ciborium and patten fashioned to hold the Body of Christ. The materials that they are constructed out of remind us that this is not something that is ordinary, but something that is extraordinary. In art and pictures, a chalice and patten placed next to each other remind us of Holy Communion and immediately remind us of the sacred. Incense is then used to sanctify and make our offerings of bread and wine acceptable to God. The roots of the use of incense once again go back to Old Testament times where the smoke from the incense grains reminded people of how these offerings rose up to God. Finally, our gifts of bread and wine that are brought to the altar during Mass, remind us of the fruits of our work and how these are offerings, the best of what we can offer, are given back to God.

The vestments that the priests and deacons use at Mass are also symbols of the Eucharist. For the most part, these outer vestments are only worn at the celebration of the Eucharist or the Mass. It is not uncommon to find symbols of the Eucharist portrayed on these vestments such as images of the chalice and patten, grains of wheat that will be ground into the flour for the bread, and grapes that will be used for the wine. Another common symbol portrayed will be the letters IHS. These three letters stand for the Greek name and title of Jesus Christ. (Jesus our Savior). Another symbol that adorns a vestment is the Chi-Rho (“Key Row”). It is a monogram that stands for Christ.

There are other symbols and signs that we use to symbolize the Eucharist. For example, have you ever seen the image of a pelican on a tabernacle? This image is not on our tabernacle, but it was on the Tabernacle of my former parish in Coldwater. It is often found in a Eucharistic context. The Pelican is a symbol not only of the Eucharist, but one of redemption. There is an ancient belief that the female pelican would rip open her breast to feed her young with her own life blood to avert their starvation in time of famine. In another legend, the pelican is the enemy of the serpent (substitute the word devil when we think of serpent) whose string bring death to the young. The mother pelican, mourning over her dead brood, incinerates herself, and her warm blood restores their lives. These legends and images cause us to think about the Eucharist and the sacrifice that Christ made for us.

My reflections tonight are not meant to be a complete list of all the symbols of the Eucharist. Our Catholic Tradition is so rich with these symbols because the Eucharist means so much to us. Often it is so difficult to truly explain some of these things because of the sense of mystery that we can experience while we celebrate the Eucharist and gather around the altar of

the Lord. Yet I hope that I have had a chance to remind you how important even the smallest detail can be when we reflect on the Eucharist.

As I conclude, I leave you with the words of St. John Vianney: “There is nothing so great as the Eucharist.” If God had something more precious, He would have given it to us.”