

**Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
16 October 2022**

“Aaron and Hur supported his hands”

When I worked in Alaska, my office was on the ground floor, but most of my colleagues worked upstairs. When I needed to consult with them, I’d leave my office, head up two flights of stairs, arrive on the second floor...and realize that I’d completely forgotten why I went upstairs in the first place. To remember the purpose of my trip upstairs, I usually had to re-trace my steps downstairs and return to my computer desk to jump-start my memory. Well, a few years ago, I learned that I suffered from what psychologists call “the doorway effect.” In a nutshell, passing through a doorway and then emerging into different surroundings can effectively “wipe” our short-term memory. This phenomenon also has a newer name: “the event horizon effect.” As a fan of sci-fi, I thought that sounded way cooler until I realized that the “event horizon effect” implies that my mind is like a black hole—memories can go in, but they may never come back out again!

I mention this because I suspect that many Catholics are vulnerable to the doorway effect whenever they leave church. At the end of Mass, I will exhort you to “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” but for too many of us, the doors of our church are like that event horizon. Once we pass through, we have the spiritual equivalent of a memory wipe. For example, though many of us can recall Packers highlights days after the game, I’d bet that most of us can’t recall the three readings or the main points of the homily even just an hour after Mass. Though called to carry Christ into the world, many of us “leave Him behind” at church on this side of the liturgical event horizon.

How do we change that? Consider today's passage from Exodus. Joshua and the Israelites were battling the Amalekites, while on a hill overlooking the battlefield, Moses prayed with arms raised. Scripture tells us, "As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight." So, in order to keep Moses' hands up and ensure victory for the Israelites, his comrades, Aaron and Hur, supported his hands so that they would not drop. Joshua then led his troops to victory.

Well, sustaining the fruits of the Mass once we leave church is something of a spiritual battle, and, just like Moses, we need someone to support us. Perhaps ironically, the one who holds up our arms is the very one we are to hold up before the world—Jesus Christ. In the Mass, He provides two powerful supports. During the Liturgy of the Word, Jesus is present to us in the Scriptures, while in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, he is really present to us in Holy Communion. Strengthened by his Word and nourished by his Body, we can walk boldly out of church as his witnesses before the world. But all too often, that power fades because we have failed to cherish and protect it. All too often, we have a memory wipe when we walk out the doors of church.

So, how do we fight this spiritual forgetfulness so that the power of Word and Eucharist sticks with us and supports our spiritual life during the week? The researchers studying the doorway effect have some wise, if laughingly obvious, advice: stay focused on the task at hand. So, as you leave church to "go and announce the gospel," stay on task. Don't be so focused on what's for brunch or your trip to the lake or the time of the Packers' kick-off. Instead, apply your will, exert your memory, and consciously cling to the blessings you've just received.

Let's first consider the Word of God. As Paul said to Timothy in today's epistle, the "Scriptures [give us] wisdom for salvation...All Scripture is inspired by God...so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work." As Father David preached last week, the Church's good works should focus on evangelization, worship, and care of the poor. So if we want to be competent and equipped for those good works, we need to take the Scriptures seriously.

Fortunately, there are several ways to increase our retention of the Sunday Scriptures, but they do take a bit of time and effort. First, try reading the Scripture passages *before* coming to Mass. They're readily available both on-line and in many daily devotionals. If you read them ahead of time, I guarantee that when you then hear the Scriptures proclaimed at Mass, they will resonate more powerfully within you. Second, don't be bashful about taking notes while the Word is being proclaimed. Write down questions, Scripture passages, or comments by the homilist that strike you. Third, talk about those readings with friends and family—speak about what God has just spoken to you! Try to initiate those conversations as soon after Mass as possible: in the parish hall during a coffee social, on the drive home, or out on the deck later that afternoon. Reflect on the Word personally *and* socially. Finally, write down a verse from the readings or a phrase from the homily on a post-it note and stick it somewhere you'll see it during the week. In other words, take small concrete steps to propagate the power of Sunday's Scriptures throughout your week.

So, those are some tips for elevating one of your spiritual arms. What about the other one? How do we sustain Eucharistic power once we pass through the doors of the church at the end of Mass? To answer

that question, let's first recall the effects of Holy Communion. As the Catechism teaches, "Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives [one's] venial sins, and preserves [one] from grave sins. Since receiving this sacrament strengthens the bonds of charity between the communicant and Christ, it also reinforces the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ." (CCC 1416)

Wow! Those are four amazing benefits but the power of the Eucharist does not bear fruit in us automatically. When we receive Communion, it's not as if the minister waves his Harry Potter wand, cries "*Ex opere operato!*" and we magically receive all the graces of the sacrament. In magic, the spell often operates against the will of the one upon whom the spell is cast. In the sacraments, however, God invites us to cooperate with Him by welcoming him with our God-given will. So, even though the Eucharist is God himself, it's up to us whether or not his divine life bears fruit in our lives. As noted in the Catechism, "[When] celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify [CCC 1127]...the fruits of the sacraments... depend on the disposition of the one who receives them [CCC 1128]." So, Eucharistic grace is not magical but miracle, a miracle we must be conscientiously disposed toward in order for it to bear fullest fruit.

The minimum proper disposition for receiving Holy Communion is that we be free of unrepented mortal sin and that we have observed the one-hour fast before Communion. But, beyond that minimum, the greater and more conscious our openness to the graces of the sacrament, the greater will be the fruit of those graces. So, how spiritually open are we when we come up to receive Communion? As any parent knows,

gifts given to children are sometimes used improperly, or only briefly and then ignored, and sometimes they never get used at all. How do we, as God's children, respond to his gift of the Eucharist? Jesus won't force Himself upon us; he knocks but we must open more than just our hands and our mouths. We still have to welcome Him into our hearts.

So, *do* we welcome Him? For starters, consider how we first encounter Him in the sacrament, particularly if we receive the host in our hands. If we are physically able to, we should present our flat open palms, one upon the other, for the minister to place the host upon. In effect, we are called to make with our hands a level throne upon which we will receive the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Perhaps more importantly, however, do we make a throne of our hearts as we prepare to receive Him? We bow before receiving Him, but once we have consumed the host, do we continue to reverence the king with joy and respect as he rests upon the throne of our heart? Or looked at a different way, do we make a manger of our heart, a safe and warm place for our Lord where we can attend to Him much as his Blessed Mother did in that cold stable on the day of his birth?

And then, in the minutes and hours after receiving Jesus, how do we treat Him? When we adore Him in that tabernacle, we do so reverently enough. But when you have received Communion and are returning to your pews, *you* have become the tabernacle. As St. Cyril of Jerusalem said in the 4th century, we become Christ-bearers when we receive the Eucharist. We are temples of the Holy Spirit, and after receiving Holy Communion, we become tabernacles of the Blessed Sacrament, but are we ever consciously aware of that? Many of us spend an hour before the Blessed Sacrament in our adoration chapel

every week, but do any of us spend an hour after Mass to prayerfully rest in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament we have just received? Can those around us sense his Real Presence within us; can they sense His flesh and blood becoming our flesh and blood? If the Blessed Sacrament can rest in glory in a metal vessel crafted by human hands, how much more should we honor his presence within ourselves, earthen vessels crafted by the very hands of God and made in his own image!

Consider this final analogy. Many Native American communities traditionally carried fire with them from camp to camp during the course of their nomadic annual cycles. Transporting those fires served practical purposes like heating, cooking, and habitat management, but maintaining those fires was also important for maintaining the tribe's spiritual connections to all the lands they dwelt in during the year. For example, the Pikunii people of the northern Great Plains followed the bison, and they carried their fire throughout the year in unique fire carriers made from bison horn. Special individuals were chosen to protect, cherish, and transport that flame from camp to camp.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we should show that same level of respect and care for the Eucharist that we carry within us when we leave Mass. We are the special individuals who have been chosen by God to protect, cherish, and transport that flame. When we carry the light of Christ, we embody the continuity, the spiritual connection, between two camps—between the Church, where the home fires are always burning, and the world beyond where we sojourn as nomads, pilgrims lighting a path through the darkness. We can't let that flame be extinguished, nor can we fail to share it, for the Eucharistic flame is indispensable in the battle for right and truth. As St. John Chrysostom

said over a millennium ago, “The Eucharist is a fire that inflames us, that, like fire-breathing lions, we may retire from the altar having become terrible to the devil.”

Today, when you “retire from the altar” and return to your pew after receiving Communion, will you have become “terrible to the devil”? Will Satan cringe before you because you bear his mortal enemy, Jesus Christ, within you? The devil will tremble *if* you recognize and remember who it is that you bear on the throne of your heart. Then, when you pass through that door at the end of Mass, continue to hold Jesus close. Let’s not allow a memory wipe; let’s never forget our mission to carry the fire of the Eucharist, the fire of God’s Word, and the fire of his Holy Spirit into the world beyond our doors. Let’s maintain that fire long after Mass is over. Just as we gaze at the flames and embers of a campfire, let us contemplate the fire of Christ within us, allowing Him to warm our souls, enlighten our hearts, and inspire us to share Him with others.

Just as Aaron and Hur supported Moses’ arms, let’s ask the Lord to support us with his Word and his Flesh. With that grace, let’s resolve to never again leave the flame of God’s love here in church when we go through that doorway. May we always be conscious of bearing his flame whenever we cross that threshold back into a world which so desperately needs the warmth and the light of Jesus Christ.