

The Solemnity of the Resurrection of the Lord, Easter: On Being Catholic

On Ash Wednesday at St. Ignatius, as well as around the world, many people come to Church. They want to receive the ashes and wear them throughout the day. Many of these people do not go to Mass regularly, but that makes no difference to them. Why? Why do they want to receive the ashes? Are they superstitious? Do they think that the ashes have some sort of power? I think not. I am convinced that people who do not regularly attend Mass want to receive the ashes because they want to proclaim to the world that at their root, fundamentally, they are Catholic. Catholicism runs deep, very deep.

So also, many people who do not regularly attend Mass come to Church on Easter. I am not saying that all the additional worshipers on Easter do not regularly attend Mass, many are visitors, vacationing in Florida or coming from out of state to spend time with their parents or grandparents. But those who do not regularly attend Mass come on Easter for one simple reason: they are Catholic. They want to pray with their Catholic community. They want to celebrate the New Life of the Lord they received at their baptism. They are here for the best of reasons, they want to draw closer to their Savior and they want to do this through the beauties and sacraments of the Catholic Church. Catholicism runs deep, very deep.

And that is wonderful.

So, what does it mean to be a Catholic? I could answer this question in a theological way, but, instead, I want to consider our participation in three of the many fundamental elements of Catholicism: the Church, the Eucharist and Easter.

Being Catholic means that we are part of a Church with a huge number of devoted worshipers, 1.285 billion people or more. Back in 1984, I made my first trip to Rome with my parents and godmother. I was there for Pentecost and was able to assist the Holy Father, Pope St. John Paul II. Yup, it was just me and the pope, along with about a hundred other priests, and all sorts of bishops and cardinals. I told my parents to meet me in the Piazza San Pietro after the Mass. Well, when I left St. Peters, I saw this huge crowd of people, thousands and thousands, in the piazza, waiting for the Pope's Sunday blessing. (I did find my parents, who were smart enough to go to the obelisk in the center of the piazza.) That is when it really hit me. The people in the piazza were from all over the world. And I was part of them. I belonged there. Every person who comes to Church on Easter belongs here. We are all part of this, this worldwide assemblage of devoted worshipers who today come together to proclaim our belief in the resurrection of the Lord. We are all part of this, this massive and wonderful Catholic Church.

What else does being a Catholic mean? It means that we receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist. We take Jesus inside of us. We are united to him in His death on the Cross and in His Resurrection. In my 45 years of priesthood, so many people have said to me that they want to become Catholic because they want to

receive Communion. They understand that Communion is a profession of belief in the Real Presence of the Lord, and they respect the need they have to learn the faith and proclaim the faith. So they attend classes to prepare for Communion. Being Catholic means sharing in the Eucharist, not as a meal of solidarity or fellowship, but as a real union with the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

The Eucharistic Presence of the Lord is infinitely more valuable than the most expensive works of art kept in the finest museums. And we have been given the gift of taking this Presence of the Lord within us, this Sunday and every Sunday, every day for that matter. Whether it is at a large Mass such as this, or whether it is in a hospital room with only a priest, deacon or Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist and a person confined to bed, Jesus is present in the same way, the way of the Eucharist, the Real Presence. One of the greatest experiences and blessings I have had as a priest was bringing Communion to a dying 14 year old, Jamie Kelleher, and having him say to me, "I've lost everything, but no one will ever take Jesus from me." I still have tears of joy when I remember how much the presence of the Lord, particularly in the Eucharist, meant to that young boy. He died two months later. He's a saint.

The Eucharist is a treasure so valuable that we realize that to receive Communion we need to be better Christians, better followers of the Lord. We realize that we need to reach out to others in humble service, just as the Lord reaches out to us in humble service. We realize that we need to do all we can to be pure, to be free from sin. We value the Eucharist to such an extent that we would deny ourselves the reception of the Eucharist if we knew that serious sin has made us unworthy recipients of communion.

We experience Catholicism as part of the body of worshipers; we experience Catholicism as people who receive the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist; and we experience Catholicism in our continual celebration of Easter. The central celebration of our Church year is Easter Sunday, but every Sunday, including those in Lent, is a renewal of Easter. Catholics are Easter People. That is why so many come to Mass on Easter Sunday. Easter is a celebration of whom they are, of whom we are.

Jesus Christ died on the Cross to free us from the grip of the devil. He bargained his life for our lives. He redeemed us. But it was not enough for Him, the Tremendous Lover, to free us from evil. He gave us a new life. He gave us his Resurrected Life. Through Jesus Christ we are more than the physical. We are more than that which meets the eye. Through Jesus Christ, we are spiritual. Our baptism is our reception of the Life of the Lord. Our loved ones who have passed away have only lost their physical lives. Their spiritual lives remain. Because of Easter, we look forward to full union with those whom we miss so much and whom we long for so dearly.

For me, for you, being a Catholic means that we are naturally, fundamentally, optimists. No matter what horrors this world imposes on us, or on anyone, we know that our citizenship is in heaven. We have reason for joy. We are an Easter people!

We luxuriate in the Life of Christ we have received, a Life that can never be taken from us. Yes, we can deny this life. We can abandon it. But the Love of God is so powerful, that He is always ready to restore His Life to us when we seek forgiveness particularly through the sacrament of penance.

Many people have expressed to me, and I am sure to you, their fear for the world. They are upset by news reports be they on the war in Ukraine, politics, terrorism, mass shootings, environmental concerns, etc. Well, God bless them and God bless us all for being upset with evil in the world. When the Lord said, "Blessed are those who mourn," he was referring exactly to that, "Blessed are those people, blessed are we who mourn the effect of evil upon the world." We have to work hard to fight against evil. We join groups and support those under attack. We must fight against injustice. We call upon St. Michael to help us defeat the devil and all other evil spirits who prowl the world seeking the ruin of souls. But we must always keep in mind our certainty that evil will not win the final battle. Jesus Christ has won the victory over the worst that evil could do, the victory over death. He has given us His Life. We are His. He is ours. We are people of the Resurrected Life of the Lord. We are an Easter people. This is what it means to be a Catholic. "Do not be afraid," Pope St. John Paul II asserted. There is great reason to hope. Jesus Christ, our hope, has risen from the dead.

The tomb is empty, Mary. But the world is full. The Savior Lives. May his life change the world. May we let his life change our worlds.