

The Real Presence – for First Communion Children (and All of Us)

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When a friend of mine returned to her pew after having ministered as a Eucharistic Minister, her four-year-old granddaughter asked, “Grandma, what were you giving them?”

Grandma explained that she was giving them Jesus, the Body of Christ. Her granddaughter smiled, “That must be like swallowing sunshine!”

Explaining the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist to children preparing for First Communion is not the easiest thing to do. (In an October 19, 2005 Catholic News Service article on the Synod of Bishops, it was reported that “a major concern was that many Catholics do not seem to understand how Christ is present in the Eucharist. Yet after nearly three weeks of discussion, the bishops did not find an easy way to explain this fundamental concept of the faith.”) It is a mystery that we can never totally understand.

Children at six – eight years of age are very concrete, very literal, see things in very black-and-white terms.

Theological explanations won’t mean a lot to little children until they develop the ability to think abstractly and have enough life experiences to understand the Eucharist in other ways. Their faith is at the

imitative stage; they will “catch” it if it is important to their family and believing community.

What they **can** understand about Real Presence is that Jesus loves us so much that he wanted to be so close to us, so he invented this way to be with us – as food, to bring continuing life to us. Jesus wanted to make it easy for us to know that he is always with us. Thus, under the forms of bread and wine, the resurrected Jesus is with us – “body, blood, soul, and divinity.” (CCC #1374) His whole life, strength, courage, happiness – all of him is with us.

We don't understand how this happens, but we trust because we know that Jesus promised it.

And, as the little girl in our opening story, many children do – on another level - innately know!

Some children at this age have a tendency to think in magical terms. We have to be careful, then, of not comparing it to magic. It is a mystery, not magic. Never use explanations that have to be corrected later.

In teaching children (and all of us), we need to remember that Real Presence is about **more than** the bread and wine. Eucharistic Presence is for a purpose. St. Augustine told us to become what we received. What do we do because we have received the Real Presence? Are we present to one another? to the needs of the world? Do we have as many

catechetical lessons on this theme in our First Communion preparation programs?

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