

WHY DO WE CELEBRATE THE EUCHARIST?



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Cover: Cinna Baran

Faith Matters:

Why Do We Celebrate the Eucharist?

The Eucharist is the focal point of an Anglican service. Whether one is Low-Church, High-Church, Anglo-Catholic, or somewhere in between, a Sunday service will (almost) always be a service of Holy Communion. Why is this? While theological discussions and historical outlines are a wonderful thing, and they inform many of us about *what* happens to the bread and wine, and *how* it may get to that point, the purpose of asking this question to our authors goes beyond traditional theology, so that we may hear the reflections of those in the pews.

So, perhaps another way to phrase this question would be “what does the Eucharist mean to you?” As our four authors, Amanda McKenzie, Ben Girgis, Edmund Laldin, and Kirsten Pinto-Gfroerer demonstrate, everyone has vastly different experiences of and reflections on the Eucharist, despite it being such a unifying part of our faith. They show us that it's of the utmost importance that we all take time to sit with what the Eucharist is and what we become with it. There are theological and historical reasons why we celebrate the Eucharist, but what does it mean to you, dear reader, when you receive it? What is its significance in your life?

There are many things that come to mind for me when I think of the Holy Eucharist, but perhaps my most peculiar relationship with it comes from my memories of celebrating the Passover Seder — yet not because of the Last Supper. Growing up in a secular Jewish household, my mom's side of the family would gather every year to commemorate the freedom of the Jewish people from slavery as told in Exodus. We would recount important details of the story and explain (especially to the young children at the table) why it's such a special and important night.

One of the things we would do every year is sing certain songs in Hebrew, which have been passed down from generation to generation. One of those songs is called *Dayenu*, which loosely translates to “it would have been enough.” The song is about giving thanks to God for all that He has done and recognizing that no blessing or miracle should be taken for granted. Singing *Dayenu* serves as a reminder that every act of mercy and



kindness from God would alone have been sufficient for thanksgiving, but that God's goodness is far greater than we could ask for or imagine.

“It would have been enough,” I think to myself as I remember Jesus' life, healing, and teaching on this earth. “It would have been enough,” as I hear the words of consecration, remembering Jesus' Last Supper, His betrayal, His suffering, and His death for our sake. “It would have been enough,” if His greatness concluded with His resurrection and ascension into heaven. As I open my hands to receive the Eucharist, being reminded by the priest that what I am about to consume is, truly, “the Body of Christ, broken for you,” I am filled with awe as I taste the bread of eternal life and the cup of salvation. All of the things which I listed, and more, would have been enough. But more than that, He gives Himself to us time and time again in the Eucharist, nourishing us spiritually and physically, every time we are willing to receive it. Everything Jesus did would have been enough. But, as the Eucharist reminds me, God always is, and always gives, more than enough.



CINNA BARAN

Editor of Rupert's Land News

Author Biographies



Amanda McKenzie

A warm hello to all the RLN readers. I'm Amanda McKenzie, and I am one of the Elders to the Bishop of Rupert's Land (since February 2021). I have been a devout Anglican all my life, baptized and confirmed in a small Anglican-United Church in Lynn Lake, Manitoba. I follow a bloodline of the Cree people, am a member of the Peter Ballantyne Band, treaty #6, and my reserve is in Pelican Narrows, Saskatchewan. I was born in Winnipeg, but raised in Lynn Lake, Manitoba. I am swampy Cree. My traditional teachings and understanding of our "way of life" come from my granny, father, and mother. I am a knowledge keeper and harvest our traditional medicines.

My hobbies and interests are painting and drawing Indigenous art, crocheting, fishing, traditional medicine picking, and teaching others about our Indigenous culture such as harvesting medicines, 7 Sacred Teachings, medicine wheel, dream catcher making, etc.

My passion is spreading the word of God's love and grace, and to bring understanding of the Holy and undivided Trinity to whomever I meet. I am so grateful to Creator for all He has done in my life, and for always guiding my path forward. It is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that make me the person I am today.



Ben Girgis

Ben Girgis grew up in the city of Toronto, where he experienced the beauty of Christ's Church. From there, he served alongside his family in different elements in his church community. He later went to complete his Bachelor of Arts in Christian Ministry focusing on Youth and Children's Ministry and minoring in Biblical Studies from Briercrest College. While studying in Saskatchewan, he met his wife Kaitlyn and they moved to Winnipeg in 2021, rediscovering his love for cities! Currently, Ben is studying at Providence Theological Seminary, where he hopes to complete a Master of Divinity. Also, Ben has begun serving as a Parish Intern at All Saints Anglican Church. Previously, you would have found him sitting in the back pews at St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church.



Edmund Laldin

Edmund Laldin was born and raised in Pakistan. His father was a priest in the Church of Pakistan, while his mother was an elementary school teacher. Edmund's call to ministry is rooted in Liberation Theology. He emigrated to Canada in 1991 and was ordained in 1995. Edmund has extensive experience volunteering on provincial and national Church committees and task forces. Edmund's academic interests include liturgy, preaching, and creating interdenominational, multicultural, and inclusive worshipping communities. Edmund believes that the church should purge itself of hierarchy and archaic governance models, and strive to be the church (community) of the first-century apostles.



Kirsten Pinto-Gfroerer

Kirsten Pinto-Gfroerer is a lay theologian, who is especially interested in the worshipful theology of the early church theologians and those whom one might call mystical theologians. She practices counselling, writes, and gardens near the woods on Lake Winnipeg. Her book *Anchorhold: Corresponding with Revelations of Divine Love* contemplatively explores the theology of Julian of Norwich. Her podcast, *The Viridescent Circle* exalts in the dynamics between the natural world and the Christian year. To learn more about Kirsten's work visit <https://www.kirstenpintogfroerer.com/>.

What do I hope for the church? That we can truly worship, that we can realize the beauty and magnificence of the love of the Trinity and respond with awe and wonder, and that we can remember the joy of the life of the church.

Why Do We Celebrate the Eucharist?

AMANDA MCKENZIE



Photo: [Josh Applegate](#)

The word *Eucharist* itself comes from the Greek word meaning “thanksgiving,” and I am so very thankful that I received knowledge of the meaning of the Eucharist when I was confirmed at age twelve. I understood that we do this in memory of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, but at the time I didn’t understand that it was a command from Jesus. I also did not comprehend the idea of it being spiritual nourishment. I don’t think any twelve-year-old does. It wasn’t until much later in my life, when I grew closer in my relationship with Jesus, that I started to understand it.

The more I prayed and followed Jesus’ will, the more I attended church and received the Eucharist with other believers, and the more I felt God’s presence and the Holy Spirit guiding me. Now, when I hear the word of God and partake in the Holy Sacraments, I am strengthened and blessed to be able to continue my journey here on Mother Earth with peace, comfort, and joy. I am with fellow

Christians gathered in worship, becoming a part of the Body of Christ. It has helped me to live out my Christian faith daily and to witness Christ in every situation. I am definitely more grounded and at peace. When I miss church and the Eucharist, my week seems more trying and I feel off. Could this be my imagination? I think not.

Why do I think this way? I will tell you a story of how the Holy and undivided Trinity and the Eucharist have changed my life in how I deal with my daily problems and challenges. I have three beautiful children from my previous marriage — one son and two daughters. My oldest is my son, who lives in Calgary and is doing great. My youngest daughter lives in Winnipeg and is also doing great, raising her son in a good way. But my middle child, who is now thirty-one, is homeless and is addicted to hard street drugs. I love my daughter so very much, but at the end of the day I can’t make her choices for her or tell her how to live; I have accepted that.

What I do know is that I can be in her life, providing home-cooked meals, warm clothes, a tent, blankets, and other necessities. When she has had places to live, it was usually a place where many other addicts were using — in stairwells and hallways. I would only go see her if Creator let me know that it was safe. I have been blessed in that way. I have climbed stairs up to her apartment, stepping over other addicts. One time I went there, and the stairs were on fire. The fire department put out the fire, and I proceeded to her apartment.

I have been to many encampments throughout the city and up and down the riverbank for going on eleven years. When I do get to see her and hug her, I am so very grateful to God, and I pray so much over her. I pray that she knows how loved she is and that she finds her true path. It is a bittersweet moment because, when I say my goodbyes to her, of course

my heart is breaking all over again, and I don't know if this is the last time I will see her. Yes, I am so grateful to God for seeing her, but as mother's do, I worry about my children, and my mind starts to think about how rough the streets are. She could overdose at anytime. Is she warm? Is she hungry? Questions like this fill my mind often. She has been on missing persons lists when she hasn't been seen for months. I know in my heart that should she die out there, then her suffering will be over, and she will be with Creator. If she lives, there is always hope.

How do I deal with all of this and remain strong and healthy? It is my purpose to do Creator's work and help others, and so the only thing that works for me is centring my life and always returning to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This leads me back to church and the Holy Eucharist. I take all my worries and troubles to the Lord, and my faith and my heart

Homeless Jesus by Timothy Schmalz



Photo: Sergey Sukhov

are strengthened and renewed. When I take Communion, I feel safe knowing and feeling that Jesus is holding me, reassured the Holy Spirit is guiding me, and God our Creator is watching over me and protecting me. I feel loved unconditionally — this is crucial. I believe if we start our day focusing on God's love for us, any hardships we face will be taken care of by the Lord. I feel and know that God's never-ending love, guidance, and protection, surpass all understanding. I have greater empathy for the other homeless and lost people out there. I give what I can and try to help when I can.

Creator gave us free will to make our own decisions to choose how we live our own life. He never leaves us — in our best times and our worst. The Eucharist nourishes us both spiritually and literally. My faith and trust are unwavering, and my actions in helping my daughter and others who are homeless show Christ's love in action. Reaching out with compassion and helping others is not easy, as you see suffering firsthand. But I know that Jesus is right there with me. When I close my eyes, breathe, and pray, I feel His presence and love flowing within me — something beyond myself. This, for me, is the living Eucharist.

When I watch the Eucharist being prepared at church, I am filled with gratitude to Jesus for giving us the covenant and the cup of salvation. His overwhelming presence through the Holy Spirit is so powerful and great. I am exactly where I need to be, and exactly where Creator wants me. In my traditional teachings, I sprinkle some cedar in my shoes when I go out to remind me how much Creator loves me, how much He has done for me, and for His continued protection. This practice is definitely not the same as the Eucharist, but it keeps me close to God, too.

When we are baptized it signifies a union of us with Christ and with one another. This is the community that partakes in the Eucharist. Do I think one must absolutely be baptized prior to taking the Eucharist? No. In Romans 10:10, it says, "For it is believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved." Having communion and praising Jesus with all your heart is enough because His love is totally unconditional and covers all people, even the unbaptized. That being said, I believe getting baptized is very important because it fulfills Jesus' command and it symbolizes the washing away of the old life to embrace a spiritual new beginning with Christ.

This marks the start of one's journey as a follower of God and allows one to become a part of a community of believers who also follow Christ.

All of our answers to life's struggles and challenges are in the Church. Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist as spiritual nourishment because He loves us. He is the Son of God who was crucified for the sins of all of us. By eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ in Eucharist, we become united to the person of Christ through his humanity — we become Christlike. You have nothing to lose and absolutely everything to gain by surrendering to Jesus and giving up your will to do God's will.



Photo: Agustina Ares



Photo: [The Cleveland Museum of Art](#)

Noah: The Eve of the Deluge by John Linnell, 1848.

Why Do We Celebrate the Eucharist?

BEN GIRGIS

By now, you, the reader, have come to understand that I enjoy eating meals with people. At this point in my life, it is the only way I can spend time with people without having to pick up a new hobby. It's a great chance to meet people in an intimate way and become vulnerable with your fellow human beings. Sharing a meal with someone allows you to break down your walls and offer the person in front of you all of yourself. Even if you have nothing in common, whether that be interest, language, or appearance, you have an advocate and interpreter sitting on top of the table, offering itself on the plate for you to know one another. I find that when I eat with someone, I'm more merciful. I have never had a bad meal, and if I have, our Holy God has erased it from my mind. And to each meal, I bring the best thing I can, which is thanksgiving. I give thanks for this delicious meal in front of me, because I have been made equal with my common creature. I am loved by their generosity. But where does this love come from? My love for food and sharing food with those around me comes from my Creator.

In Genesis, it's the first command that God gives to humans, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden."¹ Continuing in the first book, God receives gifts from His creation: "and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering."² It's clear that food plays an important role with God, as Ellen Davis, an Old Testament scholar tells us: "YHWH smelled the savoury scent [of Noah's sacrifice], and YHWH spoke to His heart: 'I shall not again curse the fertile-soil on account of the human being,

for the impulse of the human heart is evil from youth onward. And I shall not again strike every living thing, as I have done.'"³ Davis continues,

"So now, when YHWH speaks to 'His' own heart, it is as though the Divine is trying to appease that aggrieved organ, to convince it to show mercy to this admittedly disappointing creature. This is hardly the response to Noah's sacrifice that we might have expected. Smelling the delicious odor offered by one of the few humans who have proved obedient, YHWH might have said, 'I shall not again curse the fertile-soil on account of the human being...That first lot was rotten, but now we have some good stock. Everything will go well from now on.' but instead of romantic optimism, God's statement is one of utter realism: 'this is how humans are.' The same 'evil impulse' that pained God enough to destroy the world is now the very thing that moves God to forswear total destruction."⁴ I often wonder "how similar are we with God?" When we read the actions of God in the Scriptures, how similarly do we respond? I think Genesis 8, in which God makes a promise to Noah, sounds similar to us — we smell the good food and respond with grace. We lead with our hearts as God does and find calm clarity in the midst of warm aromas.

¹ Genesis 2:16b

² Genesis 4:4

³ Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 23.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 24.



Photo: [Europeana](#)

Mountainous Landscape by Gaspard Dughet.

My final Old Testament nerd-out is Psalm 23. This Psalm has been with me for a while. I first heard it when I was nine at the small Baptist church my family attended. I heard it in a song before I heard it read aloud from the pulpit. Jon



Photo: [Matt Meilner](#)

Foreman wrote a song called “The House of God, Forever,” which is almost identical to the psalm attributed to David. The line, “You are my feast in the presence of enemies” is much different than the translation that we may know in the Anglican church, that being, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”⁵ Foreman ties the Eucharist into David’s words in that God does not just prepare the table and host both us and our foes or neighbours, but that God is the meal that we are eating. Enemies become family, and God becomes the offering that calls us to calm our hearts and look with grace and mercy toward the eyes of those with “the impulse of the human heart.”⁶ In the Eucharist, we are united under Christ, like a married couple, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”⁷ Intimately, we kneel or stand next to each other, unaware of the week that one may have had, but fully aware of the very real presence of God amongst the community. As we kneel, we meet shoulder to shoulder with those in different places and stages of life, but equal in the eyes of our Creator being made aware of Christ, as His body breaks our fast for the new week ahead.

When these words are spoken over us, “He chose to bear our griefs and sorrows, and to give up His life on the cross, that He might shatter the chains of evil and death, and banish the darkness of sin and despair,”⁸ it “bring[s] us into the light of [God’s very real] presence.”⁹ At this table, we give “thanks that [God has] made us worthy to stand in [His] presence and serve [Him].”¹⁰ In these words, the Spirit of God comes through the congregation and whispers love into our hearts.

Reminding us of the One who loved us first, relieving the burdens of our sorrows, griefs and sins, and filling our hearts with love to “all who share in these sacred mysteries.”¹¹ I’m reminded of Mary Oliver’s words:

“Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
And the felt ferocity of that love
And the felt necessity of that love,
The fish explode into many.
Imagine Him, speaking,
And don’t worry about what is reality,
Or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracles.
Accept, too, each spoken word
Spoken with love.”¹²

So, my friends, let us go to the table, Christ’s table, with awe and wonder, not worrying about the reality of it, but going with hands full of thanksgiving as an offering to the Creator of all that is good. Take time to be present in this, to look around at the people who go beside you and see them as they are, in the light, feeling the ferocity of the love of God, who has become the sacrificial offering that causes hunger to cease and our cups to overflow. As the bread enters into your palms, “take and eat: for this is [His] body which is broken for you.”¹³ This body has made you whole. And as the cup touches your lips and the wine splashes on your tongues, “This is [His] blood which has been shed for you,”¹⁴ which has caused violence in your heart to stop, causing you to love your enemies and kneel with them at this table. Let us go and be a blessing to the world, for we have received the ultimate blessing, being fed at the table of Christ, our beloved.

⁵ Psalm 23:5a

⁶ Genesis 8:21

⁷ Ephesians 5:20-21

^{8, 9, 10} Book of Alternate Services, 196.

¹¹ With the communal breaking of cookies and drinking of coffee after the service.

¹² Mary Oliver, “Logos,” *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2017), 179.

^{13, 14} Book of Alternate Services, 196.



Photo: Eugenia Clara

Why Do We Celebrate the Eucharist?

EDMUND LALDIN

In my previous article, responding to the question “Why go to church?” I argued the following:

- The church provides a loving, caring, and like-minded community for the participant.
- There might not be a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane, since the whole universe is God’s creation.
- Every human being reflects the image of God.
- Today’s church should rediscover the passion of the first-century followers to rekindle Jesus’ mission in the world.
- The institution has become irrelevant, and the post-modern pilgrims have rejected it.

The premise of this article is to elucidate the essence of the Eucharist and how participating in the common elements of bread and wine enables us to encounter the world beyond the Church. This intention will be examined through the lens of the Indian (Hindu) concept of worship and divine presence, and by interpreting “remembrance” in its liturgical context. Finally, the conclusion will bring these concepts together to consider the Eucharist and its effects in our lives.

India is a land of contradictions. It is home to hundreds of religious orders and sects, and to diverse ethnic communities. Despite these apparent differences, one unifying concept among its inhabitants is the perception of the divine image in everything and, through it, the experience of being in God’s presence. *Darsana* (or *Darshan*) is the religious belief that unites all creation. It can be translated as “being in the presence of” or “in audience with” the deity.

Derived from the Sanskrit root *drś* (“to see”), *Darshan* refers to the auspicious viewing of a deity, sacred image, holy person, or sacred site, in which the viewer receives a blessing through an active, reciprocal exchange.

In Hindu religious practice:

- Receiving a blessing: When a devotee goes to a temple for *Darshan*, they see the deity, who in turn “gives” *Darshan* by presenting itself to be seen.
- A spiritual communion: This sight is not passive but an active spiritual communion through which the devotee receives the deity’s blessings.
- Extended to people and places: The principle of *Darshan* extends to encounters with revered holy persons or sacred pilgrimage sites.

“It’s a gift; it’s like there’s a moment in which the thing is ready to let you see it. In India, this is called *darshan*. *Darshan*

means getting a view, and if the clouds blow away, as they did once for me, and you get a view of the Himalayas from the foothills, an Indian person would say, 'Ah, the Himalayas are giving you their *Darshan*'; they're letting you have their view. This deep way of getting a sense of something takes time. It doesn't show itself to you right away. It isn't even necessary to know the names of things as a botanist would.



Photo: [Wonderlane](#)

It's more important to be aware of the "suchness" of the thing; it's a reality and a source of inspiration for creativity."¹

A Hindu temple is adorned with an imposing statue (*murti*) of god. The statue's piercing eyes are fixed on the devotee. The choir (*pujaris*) recites holy texts and sings spiritual songs. The devotee stands before the statue and, after a while, receives holy food (*parshad*) from the priest. *Parshad* is usually a piece of Indian sweets or a spoonful of dessert (*halwa*). Being in the divine presence allows the devotee to perceive God in

everything outside the temple. Thus, a devotee remains in God's presence through the rocks, trees, animals, and celestial bodies.

It is worth noting that *Darshan* is a cyclical process that unfolds as follows:

- The devotee enters the temple for prayers and *Darshan*.
- The devotee receives blessings and partakes in the holy food.
- The devotee leaves the temple and continues to be in audience with the divine through encounters with creation.
- The devotee returns to the temple, and the cycle begins anew.

This return to the temple constitutes the continuation of the cycle. However, each act of worship (*pūja*) is new, for every *Darshan* is a unique encounter. The devotee brings their concerns, thanksgivings, petitions, and stresses from the previous week to the divine, and the ritual repeats over and over again.

The concept of *Darshan* can be employed to appreciate and understand the service of the Holy Eucharist. The parallels are as follows:

- The altar is Christ's table. It occupies a prominent place and is adorned with frontals, candles, and other sacred objects.
- Worshippers are expected to bow before the altar as an act of reverence and acknowledgment of Christ's presence.
- The choir leads the congregation in song to enhance the worship experience.
- The Holy Scriptures are read, and the preacher reflects upon them in the homily.
- Worshippers partake of the bread and wine.
- The worshipping community is then sent into the world to love and serve the Lord.

Although the rituals of the temple and the church differ in theology and purpose, both prepare their participants to perceive the divine in all aspects of life. In both, God reveals Himself to the worshipper.

The authors of the Eucharistic Prayers recognized the sacrament's significance in uniting past, present, and future.

¹ Davis, Richard H. (2008). "Tolerance and hierarchy: accommodating multiple religious paths in Hinduism". In [Neusner, Jacob; Chilton, Bruce](#) (eds.). *Religious tolerance in world religions*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press. pp. 360–376. [ISBN 978-1599471365](#). [OCLC 174500978](#).

The first part recalls the mighty deeds of God—from the beginning of the earth to Jesus' birth. The words of institution at the Last Supper, invoking the Holy Spirit to sanctify the bread, wine, and gathered community, bring the sacrament into the present moment, right in the midst of the worshipping community. The closing paragraph offers insight into the kingdom of God, thereby leading us into the future.

In the Eucharistic prayer, the past tense is used until the words of Jesus are spoken. We read and listen that on the night Jesus was handed over to suffering and death, a death he freely accepted, Jesus, at supper with his friends, took the bread, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you.' After supper, Jesus took the wine, and when he had given thanks, gave it to them and said, 'Drink this all of you, this is my blood shed for all of you.' And then there is the commandment to do this in remembrance of Jesus. The invocation of the Holy Spirit on the bread, the wine, and the gathering community is, 'Send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ.'

The Holy Spirit is asked to descend into the present, while the prayer concludes with a vision of the future: "Bring us to that city of light, where you dwell with all your saints, that we, with people of every language, race, and nation, may share the banquet you have prepared for all people." This hope and proclamation of God's kingdom establish the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet through the unity of God's people. At the altar, the diverse community gathers to receive

the sacrament, symbolizing equality and common purpose. The altar is the place where superficial barriers and differences fall away, for we are all nourished by the same spiritual food.

At the end of the service, the community is dismissed and sent into the world. This sending forth parallels Jesus sending his disciples (as recorded in the Gospels) to proclaim the Good News, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. In our context, Jesus sends us to build communities where people of every language, race, and nation care for one another.

Thus, we see the *Darshan* of the divine in the Holy Eucharist through the remembrance of the past, present, and future in the Eucharistic prayers, through receiving the sacrament at the altar, through song, reading, and prayer. We are in audience with God through the remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. Being in the presence of the sacred and interacting with it leads us to perceive God in all that we encounter, whether in human beings, animals, birds, trees, mountains, or celestial bodies.

The embedded memory of the Last Supper, as recorded in the Gospels, allows us to relive it with the conviction that it is happening once again in our lives. To touch, taste, and receive the bread and wine at the altar assures us of our encounter with God, whose eyes are lovingly fixed upon all of us. Our audience with the divine does not end when the service concludes; rather, it accompanies us into the world, enabling us to see God in everything around us.



Photo: [Dawn McDonald](#)

Photo: [Skyler Ewing](#)

The Faith of a Child

KIRSTEN PINTO-GFROERER

Several years ago, when I was a catechist in an Anglican parish, I had the privilege of working with an eight-year-old boy who wanted to be baptized. This was a common phenomenon in the parish where I worked. Congregants had come to the parish from other denominations, including some from the Anabaptist tradition. Many of the new Anglicans, receiving eager theological instruction on the primacy of the action of grace, baptized their infants, but others with sound theological reflection about the importance of a confession of faith wanted to respect the teachings of the Anabaptist tradition from whence they came. Because there were so many Anabaptists in this congregation, the experiences of infant baptism and of very young children receiving the Eucharist were spiritually and emotionally charged. Something that may have been taken for granted in a more culturally Anglican setting was imbued with the energy of new converts and the questioning energy of those who held back. There was risk involved. This heightened theological emotional energy was a powerful aid in engaging the mystery of the Sacraments.

One of the things that happened in this parish was that those children who had not been baptized came to the rail and watched those who had been baptized reach out their little hands and receive the Eucharist, while they instead received a blessing. The priest's rule was that as soon as a baptized infant or child reached out their hand for the bread, the parent would be asked permission to include the child in the Eucharistic feast. Most parents said yes, with tears in their eyes. Those who had not been baptized had to wait and watch. In the watching, they seemed to grow hungry.

It was a powerful phenomenon; almost all of these children begged their parents to let them be baptized when their powers of perception began to develop. Some were rather adamant and forceful, insisting in the face of sustained opposition and doubt in their motives that they too wanted to participate in the feast. The parents were trepidatious; the request had come far sooner than they had anticipated. Was the request really a confession of faith? Perhaps not in the way that these parents had originally anticipated. But longing for something that is beyond our reach, and a sense of need to be a part of something larger than ourselves, is often the beginning of faith — and it drives our faith forward. I have enormous respect for these parents; they listened to the longing of their children despite their

concerns. They acted in trust. They could not prove their child's faith, but they trusted their child's longing; they trusted the Church, and ultimately, they trusted in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

This is how a mother came to call the church and ask for catechism for her young son. I had noticed him often; he had a shock of unruly blond hair and a gentle ethereal spirit. His mother warned me that he loved neither school nor formal instruction. Reading and writing work would not thrill him and I would have to be creative. Despite the warning, or perhaps because of it, or because of the look I had noted in his eyes, I boldly arrived at the door of his home with two small red Books of Common Prayer to work through the catechism together.

He met me open-faced and ready. I don't know what I was expecting but his keen spirit impacted me. It was spring or fall, I can't remember which, but it wasn't cold enough to impede our ability to sit perched on the backs of big chairs in the spacious backyard that sloped down to the river. We

could feel the wind while we talked — a third presence with us. He, like most children, seemed to like the feel of the old little book in his hand, and its strange lilt of language added to the enchantment. But it was a very difficult slog at first. I began to regret my choice of approach as his perplexity became obvious. As I read through the catechism now, I cannot believe how generous and patient he was with me as I tried to teach him the faith, stumbling through these incredibly important realities. He wanted to engage; he cared about our conversation. I could feel his eagerness to understand, but we couldn't find an entry point where we could really discover a language that worked. I remember awkwardness, questions and answers, a polite talk — but we were not yet communicating about God. Then we came to the section on the Sacraments.

Catechist. What do you mean by this word Sacrament?

Answer. I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by Christ himself as a means whereby we receive this grace and a pledge to assure us thereof.



Photo: [Josh Eckstein](#)

This struck a chord, and suddenly there was energy in him as we talked about the meaning of an outward and visible sign and an inward and spiritual grace. I remember none of the content of our conversation, but I watched his eyes widen and he grew intense and focused. What had he perceived with his gentle spirit, while he knelt at the rail or sat at the back of the church watching? What was the light that had suddenly gone on inside of him? Even though I was struggling with what I myself could hardly express, I could tell he understood. He explained it back to me beautifully — not in concepts, but in his enthusiasm. He went beyond me, and he opened like a flower. Christ was there, in him.

He would be in his thirties by now, just as I was then. I remember that time of life being complicated and hard — so busy and stressful. I am indebted to him because the little boy he was shaped my understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. He taught me by the way he trusted his longing and thus he showed me how valuable the feast really was. His eager openness and desire to understand struck me to my core, and as I fumbled about, he revealed to me how crucial it was that I took our time together seriously and tried with all my might to find a way to convey this awe-inspiring truth, thus re-affirming the importance of theology and the fact that truth would always be a pursuit, not a possession. His trust in the little red book and his willingness to engage despite its difficulty taught me that within the sometimes-awkward forms of traditional language, miracles happen.

The truth came, the wind blew between us, the Spirit settled on him, and the most difficult concept in the whole catechism: “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” made sense to him. Sitting on the backs of chairs in a yard that sloped down to the river while the wind of the Spirit blew between us, I was shown that what happens in the Eucharist is understood not in words, but by receiving the outward sign in faith and opening like a flower to the Godhead. I believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and I have been profoundly formed and exceedingly compelled by theological writings on this reality. Yet this little child’s reasoning faith beyond words supersedes all of it. The next Sunday, as I raised my hands to receive the bread and wine, his face flashed through my mind, and I was made more ready to receive God.

Does he still go to the Eucharist? What does he know now when he receives the Sacrament? Today I pray that as he



Photo: [Maxim Tajer](#)

participates in the feast of remembrance, that little boy and what he longed for are also remembered. I pray that he still opens like a flower knowing Christ there within him. What about you? Do you remember what you knew of God when you were a child? Do you remember being at the rail with lifted, longing hands? Do you remember the outward sign in your mouth and the inward awareness of Christ’s real presence? What wisdom was there that you need now? I pray you receive it and pursue it for all eternity.