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The Easter revelation is this, we are living in the Heart of God. If you find this too good to be true don't worry. The disciples and followers of Jesus resisted it too. And in their compassion for us they included their resistance in the Gospels. It takes time for all of us to learn to trust the reality of Jesus' revelation. This is why we have Advent and Lent year after year. Our Father is very patient with us. That's just the way unconditional Love is. And that is why Jesus revealed God as "Father" – a parental image.

I have some friends whose two year old recently broke out in an allergic reaction and had trouble breathing. One of the parents was at work, the other at home with the child and an older child. They went through frantic and desperate moments as they rushed to get their child to the hospital. The doctors were able to help and the child is back to normal.

The child's Mother, looking back on the experience, reflected: "I felt so helpless, but I would have done anything I had to do to save her!" Anything! She wasn't exaggerating. That's a parent's spontaneous love. And now we know a little bit more about our Father's love for us. Our Father has done everything that is possible to save us.

In grade school religion class we used to hear "It's a Mystery." I thought that meant that I'd finally get it when I grow up. But a mystery doesn't become clearer as you grow up, it becomes even more mysterious, more wonderful and more meaningful. A "mystery" means that we can't contain it in an idea or thought. It is always more than we can explain because it's an expression of God's infinite love for us. We can't explain it. We can relate to it only by surrendering to it. Trying to capture it in our heads, in thoughts and ideas, robs mystery of the absolute and unconditional love that spawned it. A mystery embraces us with meaning.

God's school in this mystery of living in the Heart of God is the Mass. The revelation of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, "We are living in the heart of God," continues in our lives through the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the way this mystery of God's love expands our hearts so that it can continue on through our lives.

At the same time we are caught in the middle of this divine and human mystery. We've just spent all of Lent reflecting on the divine and human mystery which is the Cross of Christ. The wooden beam pounded into the earth and raised up to heaven. It is planted squarely in the earth but as John's Gospel tells us – "Jesus was raised up on the cross." The cross raises Jesus up into the heavens. And the Horizontal beam stretches to embrace all that it means to be human. "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." Jesus wraps flesh and blood around our humanity while our Father wraps his arms around our wounded hearts.

The Cross of Jesus reveals God's heart pouring God's self out for our healing. At the same time the Cross is caused by our fear that passes our wounded pain onto one another. A fear that blames its pain on people outside of our self. (Continued next week).

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The Mystery of Easter & the Eucharist continued

We are Living in the Heart of God. As the Gospels show us, however, even the apostles and disciples resisted giving themselves to this mystery. It was just too good to be true. It revealed a God that was beyond any god they could ever imagine.

As a matter of fact the prophets and scriptures of the Hebrew Testament had constantly warned against reducing their God to an idol. When Moses went up the mountain to meet God and receive the Ten Commandments he returned to idol worship. The people had reduced the God who revealed himself to Moses to a god that they could handle, a god who fit into their understanding of sacrifice, power and blame.

According to the prophets idols are created in human images, limited to the confines of human imagination. The idols live in the heaven, separate from us so that we must reach up to them and “get” their attention. We need to cajole the idols, beg them to help us. And then we need to sacrifice to the idols in order to sooth their anger. The idols are stingy and bestow their favors of power, prestige and wealth on a chosen few. Idols are created in our own image.

Idols make sense to us. They are the way we have imagined god from the beginning of time. But they are not the living God. They fit our human ego, with its feeling of separation, its propensity to divide experience into either/or, for or against, black and white categories, and its need to projects its fears and frustrations outside of itself, to blame them on other people. This is the human wound that caused the death of Jesus.

And the revelation of the Christian Testament is that this wound also reveals God’s compassion. The Living God, the Father of Jesus, does not demand sacrifice in reparation for our sinful woundedness. Jesus, the Son of God, sacrifices himself and exposes the Father’s compassionate heart on the cross.

The Living God does not remain in a distant heaven but walks among us as one of us. Our God is like us in everything but sin. Jesus experiences and develops in the way that all humans live and grow. The Living God is our God because he has chosen us as his “Beloved”. The Living God loves us for who we are and when we can accept this, when we surrender to its mystery, we are engaging in worship. Worship comes from the English “worth ship.” It means that we recognize this Living God as worthy of our devotion, as worthy of our surrender in faith.

The breathtaking revelation of Jesus is that the Living God is not like any other god. We could have never imagined the Father of Jesus. He is unlike any god any religion has ever imagined. Who could imagine a God, who when his Son is murdered like a criminal, responds with compassion and forgiveness? (Continued next week).

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The Mystery of Easter and the Eucharist concluded

The inclination to reduce God to an idol that fits our fearful expectations is opposed by the revelation of the Living God who is beyond any god we can imagine, means that when we come to Mass we come with a double agenda. The agenda of our wounded heart is usually foremost in our awareness and motivation. Its motivation is to survive and thrive in any way possible. It is committed to idols, to gods who fit into the demands of its fears. Our culture emphasizes power, possessions and prestige as the way to pursue our fear driven agenda. We saw this on the 1st Sunday of Lent when we read about Jesus' temptations in the desert.

But we also come to Mass with a "soul agenda." We are intuitively aware that God is our Source, loving us into existence. And this is affirmed by Jesus' revelation of the intimate and unconditionally loving Father. When Jesus' revelation melts our resistance, when we recognize this Living God as worthy of our lives, as the source, meaning and purpose of our lives, then our worship springs from our deepest self created from the love of God. Our worship becomes a relationship and a celebration of that which is most real about our lives. We know from inside that God is worthy of being first and central to our lives.

According to Jesus the place for nurturing this kind of worship is around a table, sharing food and drink with one another. I learned to be a Sedlak sitting around my parent's table. And I've learned more about being a Redemptorist sitting around the table here at St. Michael's than I did in my thirteen years in the seminary. Sitting around a table, relaxed with family and friends is when we catch mystery and sort through the meaning of our lives. Its not usually an intellectual discussion but a telling of stories. This is why Jesus gathered people together to share a meal. He had a story to tell about the Living God. At Mass we begin to understand the story of our lives as part of the greater story of Jesus Christ.

It is at this table that we catch the meaning of living in the Heart of God. Jesus takes common ordinary things, bread and wine, and declares them as his sacred body and blood. He blesses them and they are transubstantiated, they become his body and blood.

The greater mystery is still to come. We are just ordinary people. But around our Father's table we are extraordinary, beloved children. We are fed by Jesus, with himself. We are transubstantiated into his risen body. Not only are we living in the Heart of God, but when we surrender our resistance, relax and trust God's goodness, we **BECOME THE LIVING HEART OF GOD.**

Now this is a mystery. It's our mystery because our Father loves us this much. And it's a mystery that transforms us as we share in it with one another at our Father's table.

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Worship

We have an innate need to connect to and reverence the beauty and infinity of an absolute reality which is beyond the grasp of our mind and senses. Of all the human activities worship, provided it is with openness and faith filled surrender, is the most direct route toward contact with this Infinite Source of all that exists. In worship we experience the Love that sustains our spirit and purposeful living. When we honor the Source and Essence of life we find that life works within us. We experience the basic compassion and abundance of the God of life. Life becomes friendly toward us; people become helpful, circumstances cooperative

The basic attitude of worship is to attune ourselves to God's wholeness. And out of this relationship our wholeness is nurtured into being. But God must be first in our lives or we end up with shadow figures created by our ego. And as the Hebrew Testaments reminds us over and over, these are stone idols, they cannot give life. They reduce the infinite God of unconditional love to a puppet of our fears.

In our great act of worship, the Mass, every action we make is meant to reverence God as God is present to us as gift, as love for all of us creating us into the body of Christ. The ritual of our Catholic worship continually expands us and carries us beyond the limited perspective of our ego. It involves the whole of our person in a vastly more inclusive and healing way of relating to God.

The Eucharist is the place where our whole personality is engaged in worshipping God as First in our lives. Its ritual creates a variety of experiences, attitudes and responses that let Jesus transform us into his body and blood. The Eucharist is where our Father teaches us around his table to live a quality of life that is worth living for all eternity and a way of being that is profoundly rich enough to share with those we meet throughout our lives. The Eucharist is where we interact with God and one another in such a way that we ritually live out God's love for us in our loving worship and our acceptance of one another.

Worship is not about us. We are about God. And God knows we will instinctively reduce our relationship to God to the fears, defenses, and confines of our ego. God wants us to be free so that we can love as God loves. The Eucharist is about God's love and our being healed into the flesh and blood embodiment of that love.

The purpose of the Eucharist is not just to bring about the real presence of Christ in bread and wine. It is about making us present to Christ so that Christ can turn us into his living body and blood for all those who hunger to be fed by love. We are meant to love as we are loved. The Eucharist doesn't merely set an abstract ideal before us, but it plunges us into its concrete reality. It brings us face to face with the incredible variety of God's children, our brothers and sisters. And it does this by recognizing our shared woundedness, our sharing in God's unconditional, healing love, and our responsibility to honor and respect one another. Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. -

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Worship

The essence of worship is recognizing the reality of our relationship to God. We are born of God's love. Our happiness is God's joy. And our self destructive behaviors compel God's compassion.

Our lives thrive on intimacy with God. But our ego is built on an illusion of separation which is generated by the way our mind works. We feel that we can be our self only by being separate from God, one another and the parts of our self we don't like. Our mind identifies our self with abstract qualities that we feel will help us survive. This leaves us disconnected from everything that is life giving. It creates an emptiness in our experience of our self and we try to fill this hole with power, possessions and prestige.

Worship is a ritual combination of actions, attitudes and values that bring us back to our true foundation in God. The only way to know and relate to God is love. We grow in love by loving one another ("If you say you love God but do not love one another you are a liar" 1 John), loving all of our self, and most of all by loving God, making God first in our lives. God, sisters and brothers and self are all facets of this unified field of love. Worship involves our whole personality in this loving relationship.

Worship begins by recognizing that God is first, the most essential reality of our lives, and it continues by reminding us of our shared wound that militates to separate us from God and one another. Worship recasts our worldview, our way of imagining ourselves in relation to God and one another by placing our life within the context of God's actions in creation. It retells the story of our life as part of the story of God's loving compassion for all people in Jesus Christ.

Worship reminds us that we are God's people, a community of worship, a family gathered around our Father's table. And then it reveals our baptismal anointing as a priestly people joined in Jesus' thanksgiving of trusting his life to the Father who has made all of this possible. And finally it sends us forth as Christ's living body to feed the rest of our sisters and brothers with our Father's love. This is the most holistic action of our lives. Worship involves our whole being in a relationship with all that is life giving and meaningful.

Unless God is first we will never know the unconditional love we ache for. When God is not first we're going to expect someone or something to fill in the emptiness left by God. And since God is infinite we have an infinite emptiness. Nothing can fill in that emptiness except God and we will be driven to find an illusory substitute. We'll always be disappointed by anything we put our hope in. idolatry, choosing anything else as first in our lives, separates us from the reality of who we are created to be. When we make an idol of our self we increase self-will, self-justification, self-righteousness, self-indulgence and when these fail we increase self recrimination. We become disappointed with our self and every one else. We feel separated from the very source of our existence and identity. We want to be decent, loving people and the only way to do this is by loving God. And our Father's table is where we're raised in this love.

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Getting the Mass

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“I don’t get anything out of Mass.” This statement is often dismissed for missing the point. The thought behind the dismissal is that the grace of Mass is a spiritual thing and can’t be “gotten”, experienced or felt. Grace is like a vitamin. There are no instant results.

Although this is true I believe there is something more to this statement than meets the ear. “I don’t get anything out of Mass” may also mean “I expect it to have some kind of impact on my life,” “I expect it to change me in some way.” The Second Vatican Council called for “full, active, and conscious participation” in the Mass. I believe that in this era of self-help and self-improvement people expect results, especially when they are engaged in this profound mystery and action of our faith.

It seems obvious that there should be a direct correlation between our deepest beliefs, our highest revelation, and the reality of the lives that we live in public and in private. If this is not the case, then whatever we think we are doing in our spiritual endeavors couldn’t really be adding up to anything of enduring significance. And we who believe that the Mass is one of the most significant actions of our lives expect our participation to have an effect on the rest of our life.

We expect this profound act of worship to help us live with a generosity of spirit, a heightened moral sensitivity, and surrender to a power higher than our own ego. But more than that, we expect it to give us the freedom to live according to these expectations. And I am convinced that these expectations are the awakening of a spiritual impulse in our hearts and minds that is the work of God’s Holy Spirit. It is our Father’s quiet whisper imploring us to relinquish our attachment to our cultural conditioning, our consumer mentality, and our overly dominant ego. It is our Father’s Spirit guiding us to the freedom of the children of God, created in the image of the Divine Son, our brother.

In the coming weeks I would like to reflect on the opportunity that the Mass provides for our growth and development as human children of a divine Father. I believe that the Mass is the most holistic of all our actions. It not only involves all of our faculties (mind, body, sense, emotions, aesthetic sensitivities, intuition, faith, hope and love), it also helps us relate to God, one another and our self in a way that brings wholeness to our personality.

This will involve looking at the attitudes that will help us respond to this divine opportunity. The Mass is not a Band-Aid therapy. It’s not about fixing us so that we perform more efficiently and get along better. It is about transformation. And this means that if we want to allow the Mass to grow us we have to be willing to be somebody with different thoughts, ideas, beliefs and experiences than we have now. Our aims and aspirations will be changed. It’s like a larva that thinks crawling faster is the goal, when the truth is that it is being transformed into a butterfly.

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As we move forward in our reflection on how the Mass transforms our lives I want to try to put this transformation in perspective. I say “try” because this is new for me and I imagine it is also new for you.

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“New” in the sense that it expects an attitude toward ourselves and an understanding of ourselves that we are not used to.

Last week I mentioned that we will have to give up our present way of thinking about ourselves. We have been taught to deal with ourselves from the perspective of our ego. While this is helpful and necessary it does not serve the kind of transformation that the Mass intends.

Our ego is the sense we have of our self which is made up of our thoughts about our self. It is the story we use to explain our self and use to make sense out of our present experiences. Pay attention to the conversation going on in your head and you will become aware of your ego. The important thing to know is that the ego is an interpretation of the things that happened in the past and a projection of the past onto the future. A key element of the ego’s story is a feeling that something outside of me has failed me. Therefore the future is seen as the possibility of gaining the remedy for that failure. I need to change myself and change the people and environment around me to find satisfaction for what is missing in my life. I feel that I can find completion only in the future – which means I continue to put off the possibility of completion in the here and now. And the only place we can truly meet God is here, right now. We are literally living in our head, believing that our thoughts are who we are.

Our ego’s way of acting and experiencing is all that we know. And so when hear about something that is meant to be good for us we immediately approach it from the ego’s vantage point. This means that we try to change our thoughts about our self so that we are in line with this new insight. Notice this means that we fight against our present thoughts to become our new thoughts. In both cases these are just thoughts, they are not who we really are.

For instance, two weeks ago when I said that “God must be first in our lives because anything else is idolatry”; I decided to “make” God first in my life. My intention is good but I am fighting a losing battle because I am acting from my ego. Changing my thoughts will have little impact on the way my ego works. My ego works to make itself first in my life by thinking these thoughts. These are just thoughts, not who I really am.

It’s really important to recognize that this is totally natural. It’s the way our ego works to survive. And our ego is, up to now, our only tool. If we try to fight our ego we will lose because we are using our ego to do the fighting. Do you see how we’re caught? It’s so important to know this so that we can learn to loosen up, and not judge ourselves. I’ve struggled and talked to many people who have struggled for years to change, but we get nowhere. At best our ego can only change our thoughts, it can’t change who we are. Happily all things are possible for God.

The way out ego is God’s way of gentleness and compassion. We need to become aware of our ego and with God’s help accept it for what it is. Paradoxically this will loosen our ego’s grip.

And this is why I also mentioned that one of the most important things to remember about the Mass is that God is the primary actor. “The Eucharist is primarily the work of God; nothing less than what God is doing ...” When we remember this than we can ask God for the help we need and this allows us to surrender to the present moment. It takes us out of the past and future of our ego’s story. Ken Sedlak

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When God is first in our lives everything else will find its proper place.
 “The Eucharist is primarily the work of God; nothing less than what God is doing...”

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These two sentences need to be read together because they complete each other. For people trying to live a spiritual life the natural reaction is to strive to make God first in their life.

If they don't get fooled by their good intentions they will soon find that many other things actually come before God in their life. There are many things to worry about, other things to plan for, and little room left for God. Even though the recognition that many things actually do come before God in their life is disappointing and frustrating, it is also a step forward in spiritual development. It can break the illusion that we are in control of our life.

We cannot make God first in our lives but we can learn to "let" God be first. At the very core of our being God dwells as the loving Source of our existence. We are being loved into existence at this very moment. At the same time we feel separation from God, estranged from our Divine Source. There is no distance between God and ourselves, yet we feel separate: Spirituality is about how we learn to appreciate, acknowledge and include this reality and experience into our identity and consciousness.

Making God first in our lives is different than "letting God" be first in our lives. Our best efforts do not bring God closer, they create distance. They put our ego between God and our self. Our ego's striving becomes the barrier. Surrender, letting go, allowing presence to arise within us is the way to let God be first.

This is why it is important to remember that "The Eucharist is primarily the work of God." Another way of saying this is "Never think of God as the goal of our striving, know God to be the Source." Meister Eckhart put it this way:

I could not bear to touch God with my hand
when He came within reach.
But He wanted me to hold Him.
How God solved my blessed agony,
who can understand it?
He turned my body into His.

By its nature our ego creates separation. However we are more than our ego and God is working to awaken us.

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"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "Amen!"

We begin the Mass with words that are so familiar that we barely notice the awesome mystery in which we are about to steep ourselves.

Our "Amen" immerses us like a flow-through-teabag in the boiling cauldron of the loving Trinity. This loving of the Trinity will soak us and infuse our human nature with the flowing love of its own Nature.

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We respond to the presenting of this mystery with “Amen!” Why response? Because even though our right hand traced the sign on our body and our voice gave sound to the words, it is God who draws us into this Triune community of love. Remember, “The Eucharist is primarily the work of God; nothing less than what God is doing...” God is the giver. We are free to gratefully accept or pass over this gift. We are free to accept our role in this Divine Community or retreat into our separate and personal piety.

The Trinity is how (not “what”) we discover and experience as the God who loves us. Trinity, “tri (u) ity,” confronts our minds with the seemingly contradictory image of the three-and-one. These who are the same time One as we are one even though we feel so separate. You can see that there is a “letting go” on our part so that we can let Trinity be our God.

This “letting go” means that we give up the illusion of separation to take our place in this common unity, this divine community. This certainly isn’t easy to give up because most of us were brought up to attend Mass as a private devotion, a personal time between God and ourselves. We also need to give up our literal and logical way of understanding ourselves so that we can participate in this paradox of the Trinitarian Community.

“Paradox” is a seeming contradiction that brings together what normally seems incompatible, but which, when received gently and openly, reveals in this “creative tension” a richer, more multi-dimensional reality. And this reality is “nothing less than what God is doing...” in us.

In our “letting go” to receive this paradox we are set free to grow in love, to become truly human. We accept our reality created in the image of God who is Trinity. We accept God on Trinity’s terms.

Our Ego wants to hold onto its illusion of being separated. For this is how it survives. It is created on identification with thoughts and the separation into this/that, either/or, me/you, right/wrong, for me/ against me, that these thoughts necessitate. We begin the Mass by discarding this small and separate reality to accept Trinity’s gracious awakening as the source and substance of our lives and our world. Trinity’s creation is an intimate place with a space reserved for us.

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We begin Mass with the sign of the Cross. This is an anointing into the community of the Trinity through the cross of Christ. We are accepting our inclusion in God by accepting Jesus’ revelation that it happens through dying to our self (the cross) and rising to the fullness of life in Christ.

Our letting go into Trinity’ Community is an ever-progressive immersion into greater and deeper relationships. Worship’s goal isn’t meaning but meeting. Our worship is not doctrine disguised in ritual but action that immerses us in the dynamic, intimate, yet perilous space of Trinity’s own life. When we meet the Trinity we meet three Persons who are not discrete, individuated and separate centers of consciousness as we humans like to pretend to be. Rather the persons of the Trinity exit by giving themselves to one another in mutual self-surrender. To speak of persons in Trinity is to speak of God given: given to, given away, giver over, poured out, each person to the other in an endless exchange and

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communion. In God, therefore, personhood arises from self-gift and self-surrender, not from clinging to “identity” or asserting “personality.” Father, Son and Spirit express their unique nature by loving us into creation, walking among us as love given flesh and blood, and inspiring our response. This is the love with which we sign ourselves at the very beginning of our worship.

The Divine “letting go” is the source of our “letting go.” To use a biblical word, God’s interpersonal life – as revealed by the Father’s giving himself in creation, by Jesus’ giving himself into our humanness and dying to heal our wounds, and by the Spirit guiding our response – is “kenotic.” Kenosis is the Greek word Paul uses in Philippians to describe how Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied [ekenosen] himself, taking the form of a slave...” (Phil 2:6-7).

How does the Lamb of God “take away” our sin (John 1:29)? How does Jesus, the Divine Son of the human mother, “overcome death and darkness.” Jesus takes away the sin of the world by dramatically exposing what is the real sin of the world, the illusion of separation that creates fear within us and pushes us to attack those who do not fit into our schema for survival. Jesus exposes this woundedness by refusing the usual pattern of retaliation and, in fact, “returning their curses with blessings” (Luke 6:27), then by feeding us with his consciousness so that we can “follow him” in doing the same.

It is not that Jesus is working some magic in the sky that “saves the world from sin and death.” Jesus is working some magic in history that redefines its direction forever. Jesus is not changing his Father’s mind about us; he is changing our mind about what is real and what is not. And the Mass immerses us in this redeeming love of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Like most spiritual matters it cannot be understood with our dualistic, rational mind, but only in the paradox and mystery of spirit. It is a transformative image and vision that utterly rearranges our sense of reality and the nature of God, and our way of relating to God, our self, and each other. Evil is not overcome by aggression or even avoidance, but by loving. Fight and flight perpetuate evil, only love can transform it.

And the way that Jesus passes this onto us is by simply saying “Do this!” We do not have to understand this, agree with it or even change our lives. He just said, “Do this!” The Mass is an action, a sacred ritual that involves us in living his revelation as we cross ourselves “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen!

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Jesus takes the bread and wine, blesses them, breaks them and shares them with his followers. Then he tells us, his followers: “Do this in memory of me.”

Doing as Jesus does involves us physically and enlists our intention to bring us into his consciousness, his relationship to God and one another. “Doing as Jesus does” also involves us through imitating him. This invitation is simple, subtle and profoundly healing. It plays on the Trinitarian nature of we who are created in the “image and likeness of God.” Since our very nature is relational we exist as an inter-dividual reality, we are at once personal and social, psychological and cultural. We live unique lives but always in relation to God, others and our culture. We are clearly not the separate individuals our consumer culture would like us to believe..

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Of course our culture would not have this power over us unless we were relational. The fact is, we learn and become ourselves by imitating those around us. Through imitation we learn to talk and thus develop the ability to think. Language and imitation lead us to create our sense of self. But most of all we develop our desires through imitation. This may be hard to believe for us who are brought up in our culture of individualism. However, even the desire to be an individual is learned through imitation.

Our desires are neither the spontaneous nor original reactions we might believe. Our desires are about what our ego learns to want in its hope for happiness. We learn our desires in imitation of the people and culture to which we are related. Jesus' invitation to "Do this in memory of me" will lead us to imitate a new and far more life-giving set of desires.

As we "Do this in (his) memory" we learn to imitate Christ's thankfulness, forgive our neighbors, depend on our Father's provision, surrender power and prestige in favor of trust, welcome strangers, practice hospitality toward all of the Father's Creation, and share his bread and wine. Acting in Jesus' memory we are sharing Christ's intimacy and trusting that there is enough love to go around because it radiates our Father's generosity.

In this imitation, we participate in a process that releases our deep desire to be merciful, forgiving, inclusive, non violent, grateful and surrender to trust. When we break bread with people with whom we have little in common and then our differences are set aside in favor of accepting the Father's joy in gathering his children around the family table. In doing this we move away from the separation, judgment, vengeance, pettiness, and black and white approach that favors form over substance and formula over relationship. We are being taught to loosen the grip of our ego in favor of our spiritual depths. We are surrendering our small egoic world to live in the generosity of our Father's Kingdom. Our faith is quickened, not by opinions and the artificiality of rational certitude, but by letting our hearts be expanded to include all of our Father's creation. By doing "this in (his) name" we are grasped by what infinite Love has done for us.

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We want to be decent, loving people and the only way to do this is by loving God. Our Father's table is where we're raised in this love. As sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ we share in the Father's generous and healing presence by participating in the full spectrum of these blessed rituals.

Worship is not about us. We are about God. The essence of worship is recognizing the reality of our relationship to God. We are born of God's love. Our happiness is God's joy. And our self destructive behaviors elicit God's compassion. Of all the human activities worship, provided it is with openness and faith filled surrender, is the most direct route toward contact with this Infinite

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Source of all that exists. In worship we experience the Love that sustains our spirit and our relationships.

We worship God by loving God “with all (y)our heart, with all (y)our soul, with all (y)our strength” (Deut. 6:5; Mt. 4:10). This is much more than an act of will, more than choosing God as first in our lives. It is an acknowledgement and response from the very intimate center of our being. And as such it includes all that we are in our accepting God as worthy and first in our lives. Unless God is first we will never know the unconditional love we ache for. When God is not first we’re going to expect someone or something to fill in the emptiness left by God. But God must be first in our lives or we end up with shadow figures created by our ego. And as the Hebrew Testaments reminds us over and over, these are stone idols, they cannot give life. They reduce the infinite God of unconditional love to a puppet of our fears.

The Eucharist is the worship and ritual action that challenges, teaches and graces us with the ability to relate to God with all of our being. The Eucharist is about God’s love and our being healed into the flesh and blood embodiment of that love. This is not something we choose for ourselves but a gift in which we participate. Our ego makes itself first by choosing. However, we can allow God to teach us to trust and surrender to the gift of His actions in our lives.

Worship is a ritual combination of actions, attitudes and values that bring us back to our true foundation in God. The only way to know and relate to God is love. We grow in love by loving one another (“If you say you love God but do not love one another you are a liar” 1 John), loving all of our self, and most of all by loving God, making God first in our lives. God, sisters and brothers and self are all facets of this unified field of love. Worship involves our whole personality in this loving relationship.

INNER VIEWS

The Eucharist is an act of worship that brings us into a balanced and holistic relationship to God and one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. If we look at it from the angle of a “spiritual practice,” a way to learning, experiencing and expressing the deepest reality of our self, we begin to see the subtle mysteries into which it leads us.

The Eucharist, as an act of worship brings us before a God who has loved us first so that we can respond with thankful hearts. Its ritual carries us beyond the limited perspective of our ego. It involves the whole of our person in a vastly more inclusive and healing way of relating to God. It also acknowledges the woundedness that drives us apart. But it does this within the healing context of being forgiven and forgiving. We begin the Eucharist by recognizing our need to

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accept our Father's gift of forgiveness. And as we prepare to receive the bread and wine that transforms us into Christ's body and blood we turn toward one another offering the peace that Christ bestowed on his disciples as they huddled in fear in the upper room (John 20:19).

By involving all of what it means to be the human/divine children of our Father we are reminded that God is not only first in our lives in importance, but first because God takes the initiative by loving us into being and healing us into wholeness. The Eucharist is primarily what God is doing in our lives. God is the primary celebrant. Everything we offer is first of all God's gift to us.

As we come to experience our life as a gift of God's love we will come to know our true self in our desire to love God and one another. We will experience gratitude spontaneously erupting from our self in praise. We will wonder at the unmerited Mercy which is our Source and humbly luxuriate in the forgiveness that sees us for who we are and heals us in our helplessness. We will feel warm relief as frozen fear and rigid judgments are melted. Our inner shadows will light up with a smile at our pride as we are taught to trust in our Father's joy in our return to the fullness of life at his table: "My child, who was dead, is alive!" (Luke 15:24).

We will come to know that liturgy happens deep within us, beyond the reach of our consciousness, long before we are moved to give it ritual expression. We find ourselves as part of a community which gives praise because Trinity has given us a share in Oneness. And we join Christ as sisters and brothers in thanksgiving and are inspired by the Spirit to partner in the Father's creation.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS Being Blessed

If you wouldn't mind I'd like you to follow me with your imagination as we approach Jesus and his Beatitudes. Imagine yourself coming to Mass this Sunday and at the time of the homily our Pastor says, "Today we've invited a guest speaker. He's a Jewish rabbi who has created quite a stir because he speaks with an authority that few seem to possess. His words touch people's hearts so strongly that they feel confirmed in their deepest hopes and intuitions. Let me introduce Jesus of Nazareth."

Jesus steps to the pulpit and stands for a moment in silence, looking into the congregation. He doesn't seem to mind that we are Catholic and he is Jewish. And once he has caught your eye he begins: "My heart is on fire with my Father's passion for you. And how I wish that I could set your hearts on fire. Wake up!" And then he sits down.

At the end of Mass he is standing in the back of church to greet people as they leave. What he didn't say is that he's saved the real homily for this face to face meeting.

The first people that approach him are taken a little off guard. They're not sure how to address him. "Hi Father," doesn't seem appropriate. He's not a priest. And although they've often called him "Jesus" in their prayers, it seems a bit too familiar when its face to face. But there are people

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behind them pushing forward so they don't have time to reassess, they just step forward, "Nice words, thank you for your homily." And when he takes their hand he holds them still for a moment looking directly into their eyes, "Blessed are you." That's what he wanted to say personally to each one of us.

They see the blaze in his eyes and maybe for the first time in their life they know the reality of his words. Maybe they've guessed the truth before or hoped it was true. But now it's true for them. "Blessed, yes I am." And he lets go of their hands.

Others are so overwhelmed that they just rush up and hug him, while some rush on by in confusion because they just don't know what to make of the situation. Nothing in their life has prepared them for this. Who could believe that God would come this close!

But to those that do greet him he takes their hands and immediately they notice energy flowing between him and themselves. They feel his warmth and power and the encouraging embrace of his heart as well as their own hearts responding and overflowing with loving energy. Yes, Blessed!

Some of us approach him carrying the stark sorrow of loss and grief. We've had a little time to see what's happening so we, at least, come with a fitting title. "Lord" we say, and then it all spills out, "I ache, I feel so empty and alone. He holds us so close with his eyes that we enter his heart. "Blessed are you," he says. And we know that we're not alone, nor are we separated from our loved ones.

Still others of us need all the courage we can muster to step forward. We're used to being part of the crowd, just one of the many. As kids we sat in the back of the classroom so that we wouldn't be noticed. But he notices and we can't escape. "Blessed are you!" We've known some people who have loved us enough to give us a place in their lives, but now it is really sinking in. Our blessedness is more than just a kind word from others, it is us and grows our hearts, and we can feel its courage working within us. Yes, blessed indeed!

Another one of us in scuffed shoes reluctantly approaches Jesus as if something were compelling him forward. He's relieved to see that there is no pity in Jesus' eyes. "It's touch and go with the economy the way it is," he says. "But I wake up every morning and my life is given to me." And he sees great pride in Jesus' eyes. "Blessed are you in the riches that matter."

And then there are those of us not nearly so reluctant as approaches Jesus with a confident stride. "We're all in this together," we intone. And then a little sheepishly, "It's taken me so long to catch on and I've battered so many people trying to force them into my ways. And then my spouse finally had enough and left me and I woke up when I realized that God had room for all of us, even if I don't. "Blessed are you," Jesus' smile had room for all kinds of foolishness, especially when it's seasoned with a little humility.

A youngish woman, with the old look of having had too much for too long, holds onto Jesus' hand. He could see that she'd been schooled in a hard life and yet the lively glow in her eyes tells him that she has learned the lesson of God's mercy one day at a time. "Blessed are you" he said as they breathe the mercy together. She has become a blessing and he exalts with her.

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The aroma of mercy must have attracted the young man in a black tee shirt and peace sign. His eyes had that violent, feverish look of those who are driven to impose a moral imperative on others. Like the young man in the Gospels he was hell bent on doing more good, no matter what the cost. The young man in the Gospels had asked Jesus “What more must I do?” And Jesus gave him an impossible task to awaken him to the good that only God can do in us. “You are blessed,” Jesus said with all the kindness and love he could muster. The young man’s aggression has made even Jesus want to put up his guard.

And so Jesus greets everyone of us who approached him. “Blessed are you!” Each time he pronounced the blessing it sounded different because each one of us has to hear it in our own way. His blessing awakens us to the Divine Presence working within each one of us, loving us into existence at this moment

Can you believe that this is what he has come to do. This is the “good news” he proclaims, the reign of the Kingdom of God. We live in blessing.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. PATHWAYS / STILLPOINT

INNER VIEWS
A Perfect Practice

Of all human activities worship is the most balanced and expansive way of connecting with God. In worship we acknowledge God as the Love that sustains our spirit and our relationships. We are lifted out of the small and defensive world of our self to awaken to the all embracing Presence of God.

The heart and soul of worship is recognizing the reality of who God is to our life. Worship is not about us. We are about God. We are born of God’s love. Our happiness is God’s joy. And our self destructive behaviors elicit God’s healing compassion. Unless God is first in our lives, the center of our lives, we will never know the unconditional love we ache for.

When God is not first we’re going to expect some limited thing to fill the infinite openness of our soul. We end up with idols created by our ego. Worship focuses our awareness on the unconditional and limitless Love that sustains us. It acknowledges God as the necessity of our lives.

Love is the only way to know God. In our relationships with God we will be taught and we can learn to love unconditionally, with our whole heart, mind, body and shadow. God heals and develops us by expanding our heart’s ability to love more inclusively. God leads us into a relationship that cannot be captured by words and thus needs ritual, the entire spectrum of the liturgical environment, and the give and take of relationships to engage our whole personality.

Worship teaches us to love by expanding our worldview, our way of imagining ourselves and our relationship to God and one another. It reimagines the story of our life as a sharing in the story of God’s love for all people in Jesus Christ. This is the story of love given to us and love given

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again through us. Our expansion grows when we let go of our self and become vulnerable to God. This is already happening in us every time we take part in Mass but we can attune ourselves more consciously to its reality.

Participating in Mass includes all of our personality: our mind and emotions, our senses and intuition, our body and spirit; and our relationships to God, to our self and to each other. In the Mass spiritual healing and growth happen by including our whole personality into the love and loving at our Father's table. This table is made of the whole Universe.

Gathering us around his table our Father teaches us through a variety of experiences, attitudes and responses to live a quality of life that is worth living for all eternity and a way of being that is profoundly rich enough to share with our sisters and brothers. At his table we interact with Trinity and one another in such a way that we ritually live out our Father's love for us in the surrender of worship, in our willingness to worship with our sisters and brothers in Jesus, and our willingness to be guided by the Spirit to feed those who hunger for love.

"...let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God." 1 John 4:7

We all begin as spiritual self seekers. We come to Mass to get something. But our self-centered motives tend to loosen and relax as we spend time immersed in prayer, forgiveness, word, community, ritual and being sent out to share the Trinity's love. The beauty of the Mass is that it can transform the whole spectrum of motivations gathered around the table. Like Jesus we grow through our life experiences (Mt. 15:24,26), through relating to a variety of people around his table and through going out to share the transformation that happens around his table.

People often tell me, "I come to Mass because it makes my whole week better." And yet we know that the actual experience of Mass often falls far short of its grand possibilities. The priest may be distracted and half hearted. We often come dragging along our moods, worries and dysfunctional relationships. Or we simply might be under the weather.

The music can lift us up from the sacred depths of our soul or plunge us into dull droning. We long to hear words of hope, encouragement, insight and personal witness but there are times when dull recitation is all we get. At times the mood of the people around us is distracted and distracting. And then there are those times when we just aren't interested in much of anything.

But in the midst of even the most tepid Mass something more life giving is happening just as it is in the most ordinary moments of our life. Trinity is present to us loving us into existence as a community of human / divine beings. We can learn to be present to the grand sacredness of this moment just like we can learn to be present to the divinity of every moment of our life. At Mass this presence, on both the part of the Trinity and ourselves, is given a form that expands our souls. In learning to open ourselves to this moment just as it is and by participation in a ritual that stretches our awareness we can find both healing and soul satisfying aliveness.

To let go, to simply be here, now, with whatever is happening, will allow the tenderness of heart that lets us participate fully in the Mass and our life. Letting go is not a passive acceptance. It's

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an active attentiveness, a being present without judgments and prejudices. When we attend Mass just to be here, without goals, agendas, judgments and expectations we make room in our hearts for worship.

I bet that you have already had moments like this. Being aware of the grand scope of worship and the simple openness of presence helps us participate more fully and consistently. The ritual pattern and immersion in God's ways are like salve soothing our spirit to let go, surrender and let be. We have come to Mass to live consciously in the unlimited divine Love of every moment. Here we are looking beyond that which is immediate and obvious and simply practicing presence to the eternal and infinite.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. PATHWAYS / STILLPOINT

INNER VIEWS

You may have noticed that many priests are less than enthusiastic about the newly translated Roman Missal. We're struggling with a translation that is wooden and has little sense of the rhythms of prayer. The theology embodied in the prayers is bent on emphasizing a great divide between the perfectly supernatural God and our lowly humanity. It seems as though Jesus is portrayed most frequently as the Christ, again emphasizing that he is far from us, human though he may divinely be.

We priests wrestle with our gut reaction to this and with our seminary formation which was enthralled with obedience. Doing what we're told and loyalty are deeply engraved in our psyche. And yet we want to be true to the way we experience our lives because our experience has not been given room in a highly philosophical and abstract theology. After years of struggling, and prayer, reflection and fumbling around trying to connect to a Gospel meaning that is bigger than our minds, we find some consolation and support in the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. The theology we grew up with quoted scripture but constantly spins it toward an authoritarian and hierarchical relationship to the Christ, which distances him from us. And yet mostly because of humbling moments in our own lives we've found a compassionate Father whose Son is passionate in his attempts to awaken us to the intimacy of divine presence.

We've talked a lot about this as we sit around our dinner table in the rectory. We want to do our duty and responsibly fulfill our role in the church. And yet our gut reaction churns within us and we feel at a loss. We're sad. This may be because our role is a vocation, a calling from God that expresses our soul self and not just our ego.

Very early in my priesthood a priest friend told me about a person who came up to him after a homily and said, "You're one of those new age priests aren't you! You should read the Pope's encyclical. I will pray for you because you've lost the faith." I was young then and was easily threatened by what happened to my friend.. But what I remember most is the shock of realizing that this person had basically dismissed my friend's life and condemned him to heresy— because he said something that irritated the man. Where did that man get the idea that his opinion is an absolute authority that should be imposed on my friend's life? My experience had taught me that no matter how strongly I hold an opinion there is always more to it than I have seen. There is

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always more to learn, often from people with whom I disagree. And yet I still react, often with my own rigidity, with shock to that absolute righteousness and rigidity.

Every priest can tell you a similar story. We try to learn to laugh it off but there's a part of us that continues to be disturbed – maybe with good reason. Maybe we need to remain open and accept a world bigger than we can control. It's harder now that the institutional church seems to be acting very heavy handedly. And this gives a few people righteous permission to go on the attack in order to protect God's sovereignty. But I'm hoping and I trust that if I can keep my heart open God will bring some unknown and totally unexpected life out of this consternation. I believe that God's world is bigger and more inclusive than my world or any contrary world.

I also hope that it's clear that I don't have it figured out. It's more like I'm walking through a forest and trying to report as honestly as I can what I perceive – knowing that my perspective will continue to change and I hope mature. I've learned from humbling experience that some things you learn only by going through the pain of believing them and running into the wall of their limitations. I've learned that absolute certainty in the matter of our relationship to God is mostly a psychological stance masquerading as a dogmatic imperative. And I know that the allure of classical theology is that it has had the time to answer many questions and objections. But I also know that its answers are very unsatisfying in light of my life experience as a priest. And I know that our modern experience is posing questions that classical theology does not deal with.

I believe that dealing with our experience and the questions that arise from it is where spirituality must take us or it is simply another ideology. There are no simple rights or wrongs (classical theology certainly recognizes this – its states that Jesus is truly human *and* truly divine.) I don't believe that truth is synonymous with my opinion. That's why faith is more of an act of trust than a dogmatic statement. Faith comes from a relationship to a Savior and Creator who is intimately dedicated to healing our fear, anger and shame.

It would be wonderful if we could just let this play itself out without attacking contrary opinions. I look to Jesus to lead me, the Holy Spirit to inspire me and the compassionate Father to grace my life. And I know from my experience here at St. Michael's that much of divine generosity and compassion has become flesh and blood in your lives. This is a time of turbulence but we have not been abandoned. Advent is the time of year when we focus our attention on the possibilities that only God can create. Jesus is still the light in the darkness.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS