



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: "A Tale of Two Chalices."
Comment: *Fr Strand reflects on his own reflection during the celebration of Holy Communion.*
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Exodus 12:1-14a
Epistle 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Gospel John 13:1-15

This particular day in Holy Week is almost overwhelmed by significance. Maundy Thursday is not only the commemoration of the Last Supper, it is also the time when, in the early Church, those who were under penance came to be reconciled and restored to full membership. In some places, today is also kept as the time when the clergy renew their vows and when the holy oils are blessed for the rest of the year. Maundy Thursday observances often include the rite of the Washing of Feet, as we do here at Holy Trinity now, and this has inspired many sermons reminding us about the importance of service, especially for those of us in the ordained ministry.

But it is the institution of the Eucharist that I would like to talk about tonight, and its significance not only in the context of Holy Week, but also of our common life together. I will call this sermon "A Tale of Two Chalices", and it is a personal testimony.

The first chalice goes back a long way for me: 1971. I was a student at the university of Uppsala in Sweden, completing my Junior Year of college. Although I normally attended the local state Lutheran church on Sundays, once a month the

Anglican chaplain came up from the English parish Stockholm to celebration Holy Communion in a chapel of the cathedral. I used to assist him, and one day he asked me if I would be willing to help administer the chalice. I wasn't licensed to do so, but given the necessity (and the thrill of doing something vaguely illicit) I agreed. But it wasn't as neat an experience as I had hoped it would be: in fact it was pretty terrifying to be so "up close and personal" with the Holy Things. Perhaps the most unnerving thing was when I looked down into the dark wine in the chalice- the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ present for us there- and saw my own face reflected on the surface!

I suppose I could use that image to say that it was the first intimation I had that I was going to be a priest, but it wasn't. In fact, it was a very humbling and even deflating experience to see myself in the Blood of Christ: a symbol of my own participation in the salvation that His Blood offered to the world. It made it personal, but frightening. Perhaps I was just too young to appreciate the nature of Christ's atoning death, or perhaps I didn't have as yet a precise insight into my own sinfulness. (College students aren't always good at that since they're still discovering just who they really are.) But the image haunt me still, and prompts me to warn you about looking too deeply into the chalice as you receive Communion tonight, or any occasion when we celebrate Christ's Last Supper.

The second chalice experience is a lot more recent: this past Monday, in fact. Again it has to do with the celebration of Holy Communion in a chapel, but this time here at Holy Trinity where a small but devoted group gathered for the evening mass at the beginning of Holy Week. This time I wasn't a Eucharistic minister, but the celebrating priest. I was doing what I've done for twenty-seven years now: helping to make present the Body and Blood of Christ for the Christians committed to my care.

I still don't like to look into the chalice, but I do have to look at it in order to hold it carefully and make sure there are no accidents. And so it was when at the end of the consecration I lifted the chalice up above my head and looked at it. There, once again, was my reflection in the polished surface of the silver cup! But this time I wasn't alone. Reflected in the curved surface were all the people in our chapel,

stretching out away from me in the reflection, forming a circle around the chalice. We were together, almost like a linked chain there, supporting the Blood of Christ found within.

Now that second reflection will always combine for me with the first. I won't be afraid of myself as found in the Body and Blood of Christ because I will not be alone. All of you will be with me, and together we will form the extension of the Blessed Sacrament, taking it out into the world.

The original Passover dinner that was probably the basis for the meal that Jesus celebrated with his friends this night so long ago (and which we heard about in our first reading) was a celebration of community- it was the Jews, the chosen people of God making a statement about what God had done for them in their history and what it made them as a people.

We do the same thing here now as we celebrate our identity as the new people of God. Our Passover also celebrates God's sparing His people and making them something new and different: a people who would love and serve each other the way Jesus did at the Last Supper: not as an empty gesture, but as a way of life.

Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ. ... We who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread." And we do this together: priest and people, all of us forming the circle around this Holy Communion: "The Gifts of God for the People of God."