

Several weeks ago, at a Saturday afternoon Mass – we had a visitor at St. Jude in Oak Grove. He was a young man named Christian – who told me after Mass he was from the Baptist Church in town.

He had just been on a retreat where he had a profound sense of being loved by God – and just wanted to share that good news with others – and thought he would begin by checking out us Catholics.

I asked him what he thought of his time with us. He was enthused that we read as much scripture as we did – and that a priest could preach as well as I did – and that people had been friendly to him.

I asked if he had any questions or things he did not understand.

He really wasn't sure why I dressed the way I did – and wondered why someone told him he should not go to Communion – unless he was a Catholic. . .

My mother always taught me to start with the simple questions first – so I told him since we are the Roman Catholic Church – what the priest wears originated in days of long ago – so I have my Roman toga -- or alb – on --- as well as this chasuble, which was originally used as sort of a cape – which protected one from inclement weather. . .

Then, I told him --- he could not go to Communion – because he did not believe the same thing about the Eucharist as we did. >>

He then asked the million dollar question: well, what is it that you believe???

It made me wonder – if he had directed that question to any of you --- would you be able to answer it???

Realizing this was NOT a semester-long course on the Eucharist, and knowing I had just a few moments to get my point across – I told Christian that when it comes to Eucharist in the Catholic tradition --- it's one of the few times we take a very fundamentalist stance with the Scripture – that we take Jesus at his word --- after all, he did not say this *represents* my body ---

or this is to *remind you* of my blood --- or that the bread and wine are a *symbol* of his body and blood--- -- NO, on the night he was betrayed Jesus took bread and said **this is my body**, and he took a chalice of wine and said **this is my blood**.

Christian, I continued, we Catholics believe that somehow – through the mysterious power of God – that when the Holy Spirit is called down upon the gifts we offer – they really do become the Body and Blood of the Lord – and this is what we mean by the “real presence”. Not a memorial of Christ's presence, not just a symbolic reminder – but the real thing.

And I knew from his deer-in-the-headlight-look he gave me – that like some in the Gospel today – the saying was hard, and he could not accept it.

Since then, I have been thinking how hard it is even for Catholics to wrap their minds and hearts around this teaching of the Real Presence.

We just don't understand it – which we don't have to, since it is a mystery – we don't know how it happens, but it does. Oh, the theological teaching is called “transubstantiation” – but try defining that! Quite simply it means there is a change on the inside – that is not reflected on the outside. . . Inside it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ – while outside it still looks and tastes like bread and wine.

Now, call me slow, but I have been a priest for 27 years – and somehow this is the first time I have made this connection --- that this is how all the Sacraments work ---transubstantially: there is always a change on the inside - that is not reflected on the outside. . .

A baby, or an adult --- certainly looks the same before and after the life-giving waters of Baptism are poured upon them. And yet from that moment on, inside --- their lives are now open to God's grace in a special way.

No one can tell from outward appearances that a person has been to reconciliation ---

and yet in the few moments they spend with a priest – on the inside: they are set free from their sins.

The oil of Confirmation does not change the exterior appearance of a teen – and yet the gifts of the Holy Spirit are unleashed within them in a special way.

I swear in the pictures taken of me before and after my ordination – I look the same – there was not all of a sudden a halo on this head --- and yet God touched me with the grace to allow me to be an *alter-Christus* -- to stand in the place of Christ within the community of the Church.

After a bride and groom exchange their vows – they, too, certainly look the same – and yet God has placed a seal on their hearts that allows them to face the world together – for all the days of their lives And even though physical healing might not take place at the anointing of the sick – the person is fortified by the healing touch of God in ways that sometimes will never be understood. . .

And so it is with bread and wine – they may look the same and taste the same after the words of consecration have been spoken – and yet somehow – through the power of the Holy Spirit – they have been changed into the body and blood of Christ –

so that whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup – remains in Christ – and Christ in them.

Now one may argue – if all of these sacramental changes take place on the inside – should there not be SOME sign of that on the outside? And I think we would be absolutely right asking that question.

Yes if we are baptized, open to God's grace in a special way --- that should be reflected somehow in our words and actions.

If we have been set free from our sins through Reconciliation – that should be reflected somehow in our words and actions.

And yes, if we have truly received the very body and blood of Christ – that should be reflected somehow in our words and actions. See, I think we – you and I – are supposed to be the proof that this transubstantial change has really taken place. . . And that's why we are told at the end of Mass to: Go in peace – announcing the Good News of the Gospel // or God in peace – glorifying the Lord by your life.

If we have come to believe, and are convinced, that Jesus is the Holy One of God & that in this place we have received his very body and blood --- then we reflected that SOMEHOW in our words and actions – when we leave this place.

That's the only way we are going to convince Christian – and others – to believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Maybe you can just remember this catchy phrase – we receive the real presence of Christ at Mass – so we can be really present to those we meet after Mass.