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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Gifts for a Lifetime

The Story of a Lifetime

It started out as a rather difficult pastoral visit. A member of our parish, recently the victim of a stroke, was now residing in a nursing home. She was not at all happy to be there. She was confined to a wheelchair, her left side drooping. Her speech was greatly impaired, almost unintelligible, and you could see the fire and the anger in her eyes as she struggled to voice a few words.

She was—and always had been—an extremely independent person, and my offer to help her with her wheelchair was brushed off curtly; she had taken the offer of help as an insult. I introduced her to another member of our parish, who was also a resident of the Lodge, but Sarah wasn't interested in meeting anyone. I was embarrassed by her rudeness. And there I sat: a young, inexperienced pastor, only recently ordained, with an angry, frustrated woman who was having difficulty speaking and whose whole demeanour suggested she was like a bomb ready to explode.

I had come to celebrate the Eucharist with her. But did I dare? Would she see this as another intrusion, another annoyance? Having no words of my own, I forged ahead using the ancient words of the church: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you." And much to my astonishment she replied, "And also with you."

As I spoke the familiar words of the eucharistic prayer, and as we partook of the bread and wine, her agitation and anger gave way to tears of release. Sarah wept greatly as she partook of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Her anger and frustration, her sense of uselessness and isolation, were banished, and she was once again part of the family, feeding upon those gifts that had nourished and sustained her for a lifetime. Christ was the unseen host at that meal; the Presence which entered into her isolation and grief, bringing healing and comfort.

The Sacraments: Gifts for a Lifetime

Section 2.4 of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* reminds us that the sacraments are gifts of God's presence. They are gifts given to last our life through from the day the waters of Baptism become our birthing waters, until we are again covered in those waters in death, carried into the promise of the resurrection. They are gifts of nourishment for the journey, vital to a healthy spirituality. It has been my observation, however, that all too often, the elderly in our communities are malnourished when it comes to our sacramental practice.

Often unable to come to worship in their own parish, because of physical or mental impairments, the elderly become forgotten, hidden away in institutions, pushed to the end of an already overworked pastor's responsibility list. And the longer a person is institutionalized, or confined to their home, the fuzzier the connection to their church home becomes. They may no longer be able to voice their desire for Holy Communion, and the absence of request may be interpreted as the absence of need.

We also live in a society which tends to devalue our elderly. Henri Nouwen in *Aging* states, "Society does not have room for the elderly. They are ostracized, excommunicated, expelled like contagious lepers, no longer considered as full members of the human community." In point of fact, many people fear old age far more than death itself. The losses the elderly sustain are staggering. Their life-adjustments can be overwhelming. How important it is that, as they travel through a time of change and uncertainty, they be given food for the journey. And how important it is for the church to recognize the integrity and the gift old-age brings, as many of our elders experience significant spiritual growth in these latter years. As physical activity diminishes, the focus can be drawn to the inner life—to a healthy, vibrant spirituality that cries out for impetus, for nourishment.

Extending Eucharistic Hospitality

Section 6.19 of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* encourages congregations to extend their eucharistic fellowship to those who are unable to attend public worship. I appreciate the *Statement's* suggestion that this ministry be borne not only by the clergy, but also by lay members of the parish. This ministry draws the community together, affording the elderly and the lay servers opportunity to minister to each other. It enables both to see this sharing of the Sacrament, not as a separate, isolated event, but as part of the congregation's shared Supper. It reminds each of us of our need for community and of the ability of the Lord's Supper to shape and bind our community together. It also allows the elderly to share their gifts—those charisms bestowed upon them in the waters of their Baptism—with their servers.

The parish that I served is directly adjacent to, and associated with, a seniors housing/intermediate care facility. Each Sunday, the services are broadcast into Luther Court for those unable to get to the sanctuary. Recently they began to take the bread and wine over to Luther Court during the time of the distribution. Prior to this, the residents heard everything which was part of the worship, but were not provided with the opportunity to commune with everyone else. Such a simple action, that of offering the bread and wine, an action which eluded us for too long, has had fairly profound results. One woman remarked to me that "For the first time I really feel like I am back worshipping with all my friends at the church." And the servers also have sensed a growing kinship and bond with these members of the community as they engage in this act of eucharistic hospitality which includes all of the baptized.

Communion of the Baptized

The *communion of the baptized* is a wonderfully gracious practice, which certainly includes and nourishes our little ones at the Lord's Table, and which also includes and nourishes the elderly. For those who have expressed concern over how to commune young children, and whether they will consume the elements appropriately, the issue is similarly challenging for those who serve the elderly who have physical or mental impairments. It calls for resourcefulness, creativity and dedication to the importance of the inclusion of all the baptized. It is a challenge worthy of our attention, for providing the opportunity for participation in this sharing of the sacrament brings many surprises and moments of grace. It brings moments which are epiphanies for people such as Sarah. It encourages and enables people to live in the covenant of their Baptism. Fed on the body and blood, which connects them to a life of faith, it brings hope and meaning to their sometimes embattled lives.

The Liturgy: a Lifetime Work

The liturgy of the church is so deeply embedded in people's experience that it often continues to find expression, even in those who suffer from various dementias. Thus I have seen residents who could not tell you what city they lived in, or what month of the year it was, respond entirely appropriately with the liturgical responses that have been part of their experience of faith for a lifetime. And I believe that the whole body of Christ is enriched and strengthened when old and young, weak and strong, healthy and invalid sit at the table together and share the Holy Supper.

The Sacraments: Gifts for a Lifetime

To enter into ministry with the elderly is also to remember that we are all aging. The elderly are our prophets, reminding us of the life-process in which we all share. The sacraments are gifts of God's presence, given to us to sustain us through the many seasons of our life. And they prepare us for our future with God where people will come from east and west and from north and south and sit at the table in the realm of God. May our sacramental practice include and enfold *all of the baptized* so that together we may share in the vision and hope which is ours as God's children.

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