

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and New Year's Day. We had to get the bulletins out early over Christmas, and so I decided to take a short hiatus from the "From the Pastor" column... but now we're back!

As we continue to look through the Mass, we move now to the "Sign of Peace." We remember in this moment the words of Jesus at the Resurrection. When He appears to His Apostles in the upper room (John 20), His first words are not those of condemnation or reprisal for all of His friends who abandoned Him (or denied Him) in His hour of need, but rather, "Peace be with you." He had told His disciples at the Last Supper that He was going to leave them *peace*, not as the world gives, but true and lasting peace. This *shalom*, this wholeness of being, goes right to the heart and soul – deeper than outward appearances. He gives us peace that is forever.

We are invited then to offer each other a sign of peace. Most of the time this might be pretty easy, as we hug or kiss family members, shake hands with those closest to us and wave at other people. This becomes harder if we are holding a grudge with someone. Can we offer the olive branch? Jesus tells us that if we recall that someone has something against us, we are to go *first* and be reconciled to them before we go to the Altar (cf. Matthew 5:23-24). St. Paul says in another place, "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger," (Ephesians 4:26). It is soooo important to be at peace, to be one Body in the Lord.

After the sign of peace, there is the Breaking of the Bread. The presider's Host is broken. As Jesus' Body was broken on the Cross, so also His Eucharistic Body is broken for us. At the same time, a small piece of the Host is placed into the Chalice. The practice of the *fermentum* came about as deacons in the Church of Rome would take the Eucharist from the Pope's Mass, and go to all of the priests in Rome. At their Masses, they would take a piece of the Eucharist and place it in the Chalice, as a sign of union with the Pope.

Meanwhile, we sing or say, "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. ... grant us peace." Jesus is the Lamb of God – the sacrificial Lamb who takes away all of the sin of the world. Like the Passover lambs of Israel, so Jesus, too, is slain so that the Angel of Death will *pass over* us. Remember, our sins were forgiven at a high price – the Blood of God. Yet, He gives this gift willingly and lovingly. He does not grudge us this sacrifice, and would do it again should it be necessary.

At this time, also, the priest prays a quiet prayer to God asking that through the Eucharist, he may not receive condemnation for his sins, but mercy and healing.

The priest then holds up the Eucharist and calls us to look – to gaze on God in the words of St. John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world... (John 1:29). In this moment, we can gaze with Faith on the Lord of love who has given His ALL so that we could become one with Him.

We respond to this call with the faith of the centurion, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my [soul] shall be healed" (Luke 7:7). Almighty God has deigned to enter into the dwelling of our bodies and souls – temples of the Holy Spirit – and we are called to recognize that we are not worthy. Our sins, our selfishness, our unforgiveness of others, our constant indifference to God's incredible love – all of these things make us utterly unworthy to enter back into relationship with God, to have Him come to us. Yet, the good news (okay, that's not enough), the **GOOD NEWS** is that since He has broken the power of sin and death through His death and resurrection, all He needs to do now is to "say the word" and we are healed. All that we did to offend God, He washes away at a *word!* And the even more beautiful thing is that He is desiring, even *longing* to say this word of healing to you and to me!

Before we receive our next Communion, may we truly prepare ourselves to receive such an *awesome* Guest, and respond with great gratitude for His merciful love!