

When we gather together, God is there in all God's saving power.

When did we last get together at somebody's house to discuss a book?

Maybe it was Easter dinner...to watch some sort of game...that's especially true on New Year's. But here...where we meet on Sunday, a lot of what we do is centered on a book, and a lot of what we do is centered on a table. This book? It is simply hundreds of pages on which are written the words of our scriptures, our Bible. The words of scripture are set down there according to the Sundays of the year. Much of our time together on Sunday then, is spent in reading aloud those words and in reflecting on them in the psalm and homily...is it boring? Is it too unlike what life is usually about?

And what is this table? Just as the book is made to be a beautiful and worthy way to carry the words of scripture, so the table is a beautiful and worthy way to hold bread and wine – and that's all that is put on it – together with a cloth and a book to hold the prayers. Over this bread and wine, you and I give thanks and praise to God, and then we share in Holy Communion the glorified flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

Just what brings us here to this table and to listen to this book? Is it the fear that brought those disciples together in that little room? I don't think so. Fear doesn't drive us here...it's faith. It's need.

On Holy Saturday evening we gathered in the gymnasium across the street in total darkness except for a

single light – this big light – this Easter candle – symbol of Jesus dying and rising – this light we'll keep lit for fifty days every time we gather.

And that's the bottom line – it's "we" that gather. Before the reader ever opens the book on Sunday morning, there has to be a gathering – a coming together – an assembly – an "us." The liturgy, our public prayer, is not done by our priest-presider with help from a musician and a lector. The liturgy on Sunday is done by an assembly – people gathered. Baptized Catholics come together. We do not come to be an audience, to be spectators while the specialists do their work. None of us is here to watch. That's hard for us to get hold of because most of our buildings, this one included, are set up still as if there were watchers and the watched, the audience and the performers. That's a carryover from the time of several centuries when "pay, pray, and obey" was the way to be a Catholic. Prayer, the public prayer that is ours now from the reform begun at the Second Vatican Council, is a prayer that all of us baptized people do together, that we know how to do and love to do.

Somehow we are almost privileged and obliged to come here on Sunday – not to "go to " Mass, not to "attend" Mass, but to gather to celebrate the Mass, together to do the Mass, to do Eucharist. It is the privilege to the baptized: only those who are baptized into the death of Christ and live now in Christ can make the prayer and communion at this altar. And it is our obligation: we baptized must do this on Sundays. The Church has a rule about attending Mass on Sunday. The point of that rule is not to burden us. The point

is to make one thing very plain: each baptized person of this parish is needed here on Sunday – we can't do it without one another. What we do here takes all of us. We aren't obliged to come and watch, but to come and do.

During our time together each Sunday, the church is doing in this room what the church needs to do, hungers and thirsts to do, in order to be the church. The deeds are done not simply by one individual and another individual, but by the church here assembled; the body of Christ proclaims itself to be the body of Christ. The body of Christ – you and I – is identifying itself, remembering itself, preparing itself to live as Christ all week long. When we come into this room, are we not like those who gathered right after the resurrection? It's not the same fear - but it's the same faith. When we come into this room, we do not come to pray alone for an hour or so. We come to place ourselves beside brothers and sisters and to give all that we have to give to the work that the church has to do here. It is the church that listens to God's loving word, it is the church that then intercedes, it is the church that gives God thanks and praise over bread and wine, and it is the church that takes and is the Holy Communion. None of us does this alone, yet the church does nothing without each of us doing all we can. Oh, but what do we bring here? Don't we come as very human, very distracted, very preoccupied people with our own worries, our own agendas, even our own prayers? How can there be a church, a body of Christ? Maybe the question is: In a world with so many worries, so many agendas and prayers, how can there not be a church? How can we not be filled with eagerness for this one time a week when we can gather all that worry and agenda and prayer and so much else up into the very body of Christ? It's hard – sure it is. Everything around says we are to live and strive and suffer and grow alone. We're so private – so on our own. So it's difficult to come here and be told: - “yes, you as an individual person are God's beloved, as is every brother and sister of ours of every race and religion and condition in all the world – yes – as the great Augustine

says, ‘God loves each of us as if there's only one of us.’” But here, here we are to set all that aloneness aside, because this is the church – you and I are the church bigger than the building. God called us in Christ into a church, a body, and it is that body that God speaks to; it is that body that prays here today; it is that body that sings and gives thanks and is nourished in Holy Communion. We are that body no less real than the bread and wine is Jesus – we become Jesus here – Jesus' body and blood. And we keep that sacrament reserved for those who can't be here. Baptism made us so. God's word each Sunday makes us so. The Eucharist we do here and the communion we share here make us so.

So what brings us to this table to hear a word from a book? Each Sunday we follow many paths to these doors. We come through these doors into the house of the church. Our house. We come into this meeting place – a meeting place for each other – a meeting place for the church and its saints and its Lord. In some parishes the doors of the building bring the assembling people right up against the baptism place – they've got to run into the water in order to get in the door. Sunday after Sunday, the font and its water recall that this is indeed the entrance to the church – baptism into Christ's death, baptism to life in Christ's body, the Church. In places where the font is so approachable, the people assembling each Sunday can take its water and sign themselves with the cross. But in all of our churches, water is placed by the door. All of us take this water on our hand and with it sign ourselves with the cross. Here, we say, “I acknowledge that in this room I am conscious of what I am a part of and who we are always: the body of Christ. In this room I let water remind me of my baptism into the church. In this room I let the sign of the cross remind me of the one to whom I belong. And so do I prepare for this deed, this Mass, we do together.”

When we gather together, God is there
in all God's saving power.