

Homily for May 14, 2006
Fifth Sunday of Easter

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 9:26-31
Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32
1 John 3:18-24
John 15:1-8

To be connected to one another here at Eucharist implies that we want to be connected, reconciled to all we meet all week long.

I was 18 years old and had lived all my life in Florida, the Deep South. Suddenly, within the space of a few days, it finally hit home to me that I was attending my first year of college in Hartford, Connecticut, making me the first member of my southern family ever educated north of Atlanta – from a family that had lived in the South since the time of the Civil War.

My grandfather had fought against the North in that war. I vividly recall sitting at my dormitory window at about two in the morning, realizing that I was a long way from home and was going to be away from home for an even longer time – years in fact. I felt so disconnected, so separated, not only from family, but from my roots as well, my turf, my heritage, my identity. I was a born-and-bred southerner in the land of the Yankees.

Well, I got connected with others pretty quickly – it was either that or flunk out, and I didn't have the money to get back home. Necessity truly is the mother of invention. One thing that helped me make a connection with others was the Sunday Eucharist – Catholics were Catholics no matter where they were, and

that vine and branches stuff not only made sense, but it felt good. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus says in John 15. We're not just a collection of individuals praying privately who happen to be in the same place at the same time. We are connected, and the prayer we pray together, the Eucharist, brings this home dramatically. At that time, a major element of that interconnectedness for me was the Sign of Peace before Holy Communion.

"Hey, Father. Why don't we move the sign of peace to the beginning of Mass so that we can greet each other as we start rather than waiting until Communion time?" I asked the celebrant of the Mass one day. He smiled and said, "Many pastors have heard that suggestion over the years. It has this element of truth: We should greet one another as we gather for worship. The body of Christ needs to assemble as one body, to experience itself as vine and branches, and surely that means we need to be hospitable toward everyone who gathers with us," he explained.

But then he went on and taught me something I had not known until then. I learned, much to my surprise, that the purpose of the sign of peace is really not to say "hi" to one another. Its purpose is to remind us of the need to be reconciled to one another, and to that extent we do need to say "hi" to one another at the sign of peace. The peace sign was restored to our

liturgy after the Second Vatican Council. Though it had once found its place after the General Intercessions, for many centuries the Roman Rite has made it part of our preparation for Communion.

The earlier spot for the sign of peace placed it before the presentation of the gifts, linking it to Christ's command: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt. 5:23-24)

Putting the sign of peace within the Communion Rite serves a similar function. It reminds us that we dare not approach the altar of the Lord for Communion if we are not willing to be reconciled with the other members of Christ's body. Some people have complained that the sign of peace interrupts their preparation for Communion, but this suggests that they really don't understand the meaning of Communion. Communion unites us with every member of Christ's body. Anything that separates us from one another needs to be surrendered before we approach the table. The sign of peace gives us an opportunity to express our unity. This may mean reconciling with someone who is estranged from us, or it may simply mean reminding ourselves that we belong to one another. In both cases, we will be better prepared to enter into Communion with one another in Christ.

The peace that we wish for one another is the peace of Christ, the peace that Christ promised those who live in him. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means more than the absence of war or conflict. It suggests a state of complete harmony with God, with nature, with others and with ourselves. That's the gift we seek for

ourselves and for all our brothers and sisters.

Part of the problem in understanding the sign of peace, perhaps, is our custom of using just a handshake for this ritual. This gesture suggests a standard greeting rather than a prayerful wish for Christ's peace. The official books simply say that we are to make an appropriate sign of peace according to local custom. Perhaps we might try a two-handed hand clasp to remind ourselves that this means more than a simple hello.

However we make the gesture, it fulfills its function if it makes us more aware of the love of Christ that binds us to one another – that we are truly branches of a vine, the Body of Christ, connected to one another. That's what Communion strengthens, and the sign of peace points the way and helped me adjust to a new place and a new life far from my ancestral home.

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