

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

7 Easter  
May 4, 2008  
Fr Bill McGinty

**“Gather Around this Altar”**

Today we celebrate the last Sunday of Easter and at the same time the Feast of the Ascension. We are left with this vivid image of Jesus, surrounded by his Apostles and disciples, taking his leave of them for the very last time.

In every Gospel the disciples are overly subdued. They listen to Jesus the Master as he explains why he must leave them. The Ascension is the passing on of the torch, the mission of Jesus is complete. Yet, his salvation must continue from generation to generation. To his disciples he has left clear instructions; they are commanded to proclaim his teaching, to baptize in his name, and to love one another in a community and fellowship that Jesus calls his Kingdom.

We probably prefer to call this the birth of Christ’s church. It is symbolized by our coming together around the table of the Lord’s Supper.

I have been thinking a lot lately about this Eucharist service that we all participate in each and every week. As I stand here I cannot help but associate this Altar with something else that I do. Several times a year I find myself anointing someone who has just died. I use the holy oil to consecrate their forehead and hands with the cross of Christ as we did on the day of their baptism. It is easy for me to think of this Altar as a tomb. On it lies the fair linens that should remind each one of us of the shroud and clothes that covered Jesus in the tomb. This similarity was and is no accident. For three centuries the Christians used the Catacombs deep under the cities to meet and celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

There in the place the Romans and Greeks buried their dead they would use a tomb as a table on which to celebrate their Mass. We use candles on the Altar for no other reason than it was dark keep in those Catacombs. For 2000 years we placed a stone with relics of our martyrs right here beneath the fair linens so that the Eucharist would be celebrated over the bones of Martyrs.

Bringing this Altar closer to you today gives me the opportunity to explain to you, why we do the things we do.

When we ask people to bring forward the sacred elements of bread, wine and water, we do so for a particular reason. The offertory of the mass is the time that we offer back to God all the parts of his creation. We do so, in the knowledge that all things were made by him and belong to him. Stone, wood, plants, beeswax, food and drink are all present on this Altar at the same time. It is God our Father who makes Christ present to us in this sacrament from the tomb.

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector  
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337  
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

So in a sense this Altar and this Eucharist represents the death and Resurrection of Christ. Before it we all come for burial. It promises that as Jesus rose from the dead we too will rise to new and eternal life. This Altar is that important; each year couples sign their marriage covenant upon it and go forth from it to begin a new life together.

The word “together” is a fitting word for what happens here each and every Sunday. When the church tower bell rings it calls us to come “together”. Together we sing and praise God. Together we gather around the table of the Lord. Together we are united in the Body and Blood of Christ and together we are sent forth to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to our world.

I had a conversation with an old priest many years ago who told me: “It upsets me that so many Christians do not understand that when the priest stands behind the Altar they too have a role to play.”

“When we bring up the gifts, he said, “They are the gifts of God’s people. Yet something happens on the Altar that too many miss. The priest offers up the bread by raising the gold paton. On to that paton we are meant to place our offerings, hopes, concerns for the week. When he raises the chalice we place in it the suffering, pain and healing needs of our brothers and sisters. We do so, for one simple reason. Of ourselves we can do nothing and our hopes, fears and aspirations are not worth a hill of beans, but Jesus has told us, that united with him, together with him, all things are possible. As he raises the sacred elements the priest says these words:

“Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands have made; may it become for us the bread of life.” Blessed to God forever.

“Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink. Blessed be God forever.”

Now as we proceed into the Eucharist traditionally warn everyone of the importance of what follows by ringing bells at the Holy, Holy, Holy. It is not something we do anymore. It is simply told unbelievers: “It’s time for you to leave because what follows is so holy you cannot take part in it.”

In the 1960’s most churches moved to having the priest and Altar face the people. Yet, it was only a symbolic change. The real symbolism lies with the fact that all the people face in one direction offering the Son of God back to his Father.

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector  
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337  
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

In the breaking of bread and in the prayers, the Book of Common Prayer unites us around this Altar. When that great prayer comes to an end it is called the doxology. "By him, with Him and in Him, in the glory of God the Father for ever and ever."

What follows is called the Great Amen. The priest should not say it. It is the response of the people. It is rally a shout, because Amen in the Hebrew literally means: "We agree."

Everything that follows in Eucharist by way of communion and the blessing is God's gift to us. From the Altar we are then sent out, just as the disciples at the Ascension are sent forth.

"Go in the peace of Christ to love and praise the Lord."

All the prayers and rubrics of our Book of Common Prayer tell us the same thing. "We do not come to church to hear the service. We come to church to gather and participate in the service.

The author of 1 Peter tells the Christians in today's reading that they must expect ordeal, and know that they share in the suffering of Jesus.

It is no less true today. There is not a week or scarcely a day when the knock at the church door does not bring a request for prayer or help. The telephone rings and it is a plea for prayers. Our members are stopped in the street and listen to a story of pain and illness, suffering and death. Today we pray for Hannah Rooney a made up name for a girl dying of cancer.

What can we do but bring these requests to the table and call down the healing spirit of our God, our Father. It is a part of the reason we gather.

This year on many occasions God has answered our prayer. He has brought healing to Sandy, Shortie, Jim Overman, in some measure to Jane, and to Tim, while we continue to ask his blessing on Melinda, Maureen, Ethel, Bob Keel and many others on our prayer list.

"And after you have suffered, for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself, restore, support, strengthen and establish you."

We gather to pray to God our Father. We gather as the Body of Christ. We gather because we are church and we are in constant need of the healing spirit of truth that Jesus' gift of Eucharist brings us.

Amen+

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector  
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337  
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383