

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year A

One of the innate desires that is part of being human is the desire to belong to someone or something. Whether the sense of belonging manifests itself in the shape of marriage, family, community, organization, or a social circle, it is not only a desire but also a basic human need. Our presence in this church today illustrates this very fact of life. Essentially, we are all made in God's image and likeness to be relational beings with and for others.

While these affiliations of belonging often demand great effort on our part, it is important to note that they are not guaranteed to exist forever. In fact, in moments of conflict and discord, these relationships of belonging can be greatly threatened. What is more, through suffering and death they can suddenly dissolve and abruptly cease to exist.

The Gospel for today is a continuation of last week's Gospel in which Jesus began to say "good-bye" to his disciples. Last week Jesus attempted to reassure his disciples with these words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me." And now before he prepares to ascend to his Father and physically leave his disciples, a feast we will celebrate this coming Thursday, a Holy Day of Obligation, Jesus has one more reassuring message. "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you."

Although we may never have lived in an orphanage, I think we all in our humanness can identify in some way with the experience of being orphaned. To be orphaned is to be abandoned and left alone. This experience of being abandoned occurs on many fronts. And it is not limited to the baby left on the doorstep, for adulthood has its share of orphaned moments. For example, the friend who all of a sudden does not call, the partner who stops loving, the job that is taken away from us, the family member who does not visit, the neighbors who move away, the feeling of youth that gives way to the limitations of age and the letting go of a loved one in death are all "orphaned moments" that make us feel so abandoned and alone. These orphaned moments are not only personal but communal as well. In our community of Penn Hills alone we can all feel increasingly orphaned in a sense by the continual decline in population and the increasing number of houses for sale. And in our parish, the continual experience of death (585 in the last five years) has a way of making us feel orphaned.

And yet Jesus says to us today what he said to his disciples. "I will not leave you orphans." Not only does Jesus fulfill this promise with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but he also gives us his body and blood in the Eucharist. Every time we gather around the table of the Lord we are nourished, fed, and we experience in a profound way a sense of belonging that transcends this world and brings great satisfaction to our yearning hearts.

In his Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist*, the late John Paul writes, "The gift of Christ and his Spirit which we receive in Eucharistic communion superabundantly fulfills the yearning for fraternal unity deeply rooted in the human heart; at the same time it elevated the experience of fraternity already present in our common sharing at the same Eucharistic table to a degree which far surpasses that of the simple human experience of sharing a meal."

In the Eucharist, then, we are no longer orphans, we are a family, the body of Christ, one with Jesus and one with each other.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles paints a picture of overwhelming unity. In fact, at one point we hear, "There was great joy in that city." That joy, no doubt, originated from the Eucharist, the shared meal and the sense of belonging to God and one another.

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That same unity and joy is available to us today from the table of the Lord and the Eucharist. Indeed, the Lord does not leave us orphaned. Let us with openness receive the Lord and one another.

Who knows, maybe years from now it will be said of us and our parish family what was said of that early Church, namely, “There was great joy in that city,” because we know in faith the power of the Eucharist and the reality that no matter what happens, the Lord is always with us.