

I tried to teach kids about Thanksgiving and the Eucharist —and got a lesson on the Holy Spirit instead

By: Simcha Fisher (Article found at Americamagazine.org)



Last Sunday, I had the kids in my faith formation class draw a picture of a Thanksgiving feast at their house. Most drew a table, some food and family and friends gathered around. Then I had them draw a picture of the Mass and nudged them toward drawing a similar scene. We talked about how the altar is a table, as well as a place of sacrifice, and how the food is Jesus and all of mankind is one family.

I was working my way up to the central idea—that “Eucharist” literally means “Thanksgiving.” But the lesson did not really land because most of the kids did not know the word “Eucharist” yet. Also, some of them did not know what “Mass” meant, and some of them did not know what to draw since they were going over to their mom’s new boyfriend’s house for Thanksgiving, and they weren’t sure if he had a table. One child steadfastly insisted that last time he went to Mass they had wine and chicken. *The chicken of life.*

And, of course, three of the boys were still convulsing on the rug because, during the story portion of class, I had made the tactical error of showing them an illustration of St. Juan Diego in his *tilma*, and you could sort of see part of his butt. *His butt.*

Some weeks, my husband says I come home from teaching with my eyes shining and my face alight. This was not one of those weeks.

On a good week, the kids are spellbound while I tell them that God made the world because he is so overflowing with love, that he just wanted to be even happier by making more things to be good and beautiful and true, which is why he made the stars and the animals and you and me, and all he wants now is to get back together with us again.

On a good week, someone wants to talk about the war in heaven, and another kid pipes up, “But Ms. Simcha, the devil didn’t have to go to hell because he had free will!”

On a good week, we read about how Jesus called the shambling, shocked Lazarus from his dark grave, and one of the boys screws up his face with skepticism and blurts out, “Is this a story true?” and I can look him in the eye and say: “Yes, sweetheart. This is a true story. It’s all true!”

Those are the times when I feel keenly what a privilege it is to be there, to be allowed to feed these eager young Christians who are so hungry for the truths they were made to receive. Sometimes it feels like the cluttered little classroom is blazing with light and I am so glad, so glad to be there with them.

But we do have bad weeks. There are weeks when it feels like all I do is tell them to stop punching each other and to stop shouting at me. All I want to do is tell them how much Jesus loves them, and all they want to do is draw butts on their stained glass coloring page. Sometimes I have not prepared well, and it shows. Sometimes I prepare the heck out of a lesson plan, and the kids just do not like it. Last week, I ended the class by snapping at a kid who spent the hour trying his best to annoy me—and when I snapped, I saw his face fall, and I realized too late that he did not mean any harm. He has just got a head full of popping popcorn, and he thought it was safe to be goofy around me.

I will try again next week.

When I signed up to teach faith formation, more than one experienced catechist told me that, no matter what else I did, I must remember that it is not about me. It is about being there and letting the Holy Spirit do what he wants to do with the hearts of the children in that room. Yes, I have to prepare, and I have to do my best to teach them well. But my efforts, my performance, are not what will make the difference. I have to remember to stand aside and make a place for the Holy Spirit.

So here it is, pre-Thanksgiving. I am thinking of all the preparation that goes into the meal. Some years, I baste and chop and knead and marinate, only to find that the guests don't especially want any, aren't hungry for it, don't like the taste. That happens sometimes, and it does not mean it was not good food. But then I have made meals that feel like a reckless disaster to me, and we end up having a wonderful time. Sometimes one of my guests spends the whole time irritating me, intentionally or not. Sometimes I don't snap, but sometimes I do. Sometimes I wear myself out cleaning, and I have no energy left to enjoy the meal. Sometimes there is some mystical confluence of goodwill and good work, and the room overflows with an unreasonable joy that cannot be explained by mere food and candles and wine. Something else was present in that room. It certainly was not all about me and my efforts.

Well, the "Thanksgiving-Eucharist" thing is not just a gimmick to teach kids. Thanksgiving Day really is an image of the Eucharistic meal. And, actually, every single day of our life is an image of the Eucharistic meal. That includes special holidays like Thanksgiving and special days like the days when we celebrate Mass; and also the days when I teach a class of kids about Jesus; and also the random Tuesdays, days when I am just doing my work, meeting the people I meet, taking care of my family, being a slob in the world trying to get through the day. Every encounter we have with each other can be an image of the Eucharist if we have eyes to see it, ears to hear it and mouth to receive it.

Every single blessed day, Jesus is calling us to come together with the people he has put in our path, asking us to feed each other, asking us to let him feed us. Sometimes the family table really is an altar, and sometimes we are the sacrifice. Sometimes someone we love says something

stupid and mean, and we use our free will and do not snap back, and then the angels sing. Every day is a chance for a small feast or a chance for a small sacrifice. Every day can be an image of the Eucharist. Although we are required to work hard and do our best, it is not about us or our efforts. The one thing that makes a difference is if we stand aside and let the Holy Spirit in.

Happy Thanksgiving, my friends. Happy Eucharist. Enjoy your chicken of life. And do not forget to lay a place for the Holy Spirit.

Thanksgiving should be a daily occurrence, not an annual one.

By: James Martin, S.J. (Article found at AmericaMagazine.org)



Photo by Mike Scheid on Unsplash

Now I know that not everyone listening to this podcast is living in the United States. We have a lot of listeners, for example, in the Philippines. For those of us in the United States, however, Thanksgiving is coming up. And if you think about it, that's a strange thing to say for the Christian, isn't it? Because giving thanks should be a daily occurrence, not an annual one. St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, once said that ingratitude was the worst of all sins, and in fact, the origin of all sins. And you can see what he meant. If you're not grateful for what

you already have in your life, you tend to want more and more and then get a bit greedy, and then acquisitive and then impatient and then grasping, and so on. From there it's just a short step to sinful behavior.

This is one reason, among many, that St. Ignatius invites us to start the Daily Examen with gratitude. Not only because it's a positive way to start off reviewing our day, and encourages us to see the good first, but because it grounds us in the reality of our lives. Gratitude is about looking at what God has already done, rather than looking at what you might need or want in the future, which may not be accurate at all. Gratitude, then, is a prayer about reality. And that's true in whatever country you live, and on days with and without turkey. Happy Thanksgiving!

Closing Prayer

O God, when I have food, help me to remember the hungry.

When I have work, help me to remember the jobless.

When I have a home, help me to remember those who have no home at all.

When I am without pain, help me to remember those who suffer.

And remembering, help me to destroy my complacency, bestir my compassion, and be concerned enough to help, by word and deed, those who cry out for what we take for granted. Amen.

— *Samuel F. Pugh*

