

## Diary of a parish priest

Tony Meadows

### Reverence the body of Christ – in every sense

Communion ministers learn how to honor the Sunday assembly



I had to be out of town for a weekend recently, and, after trying all my usual stand-ins, I found a priest from central Africa who is here studying. On Sunday afternoon, Father Placide sent me an e-mail: “Thank you, Tony! What a marvelous place. I thought I was back in Africa with the welcome, the singing, the participation, all the young families. I have been to many parishes here, but already this is the best! I want to know your secret.”

To have our Sunday morning Mass compared favorably to the vigor of the African Church is golden. What could be better? I was suffused with pride for our hospitality and singing, but the next Sunday I noticed something a bit off kilter.

#### **The primary purpose**

Our communion ministers are well formed. The training is not merely logistics and choreography, but contains a good measure of theological reflection, pastoral common

sense and prayer. Part of the training is to discuss the function of this ministry, frequently described by rookies as “helping Father Meadows pass out communion.”

“Thank you for playing,” I say. “We have some lovely parting gifts.”

The purpose is to help the body at prayer to achieve its deepest unity in the sharing of the body and blood of the Lord. To do that, the ministers of communion need to take their time, reverencing the body of Christ that is both “at the table and on the table.”

It seems to me, then, connector of the dots that I am, that the ministers of communion need to be vigilant about the unity of the assembly, not merely during the communion rite, but throughout the liturgy. Otherwise, they could pop over from their plate of donuts in the rectory kitchen like priests of yore at communion time. I am not making this up.

### **Room with a view**

So on the Sunday of my return, the communion ministers were huddled, as if on a launch pad, awaiting the signal to process down the center aisle. The faithful were gathering, climbing the aerobically planned stairs to the portico and through the central door. Some tried to fetch a bulletin for emergency reading matter in case my homiletic spark plugs were not firing. Most dipped a finger in to the font. All of them had to dodge the cluster of communion ministers who were utterly absorbed in conversation with each other like flight attendants on a really bad airline. I tuned into the conversation.

One thread was about the local team, another about nail polish, and a third about grave plots. "Agnes, dear," said Moira in a lilting brogue, "have you done anything at all about buying that grave plot?" "Oh yes indeed," Agnes replied. "And it's right near the lake so I'll have a *marvelous* view."

At that very moment, the marvelous view most available to us was the sight of God's people pouring in through the doors. If the ministers of communion function at the most focused and intense experience of communion in the plan of the liturgy, then it seems to me that they need to be focused on every element of Christ's presence. That

means an awareness of the body as it gathers and, indeed, as it disperses.

### **Go forth and tidy up**

I noted at the end of Mass an urgent dash up to the aisle by some of these same ministers, presumably to put the sacristy in order, causing all sorts of mayhem in the aisles as they trampled the body of Christ on its way out the door. I'm planning ministerial tune-up meeting in the hope that they will be able to honor Christ in the act of assembling, and in the act of being sent.

As the African priest reminded me, ours is a wonderful place. But without attention and periodic maintenance, things have a way of breaking down. This bad behavior is troubling, to be sure, but it is a small matter, easily corrected, that will go a long way to build up the whole assembly in the art of liturgical prayer. Maybe that's part of my "secret" I should share with Father Placide!

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Today's Parish Minister, November/December 2007