

Home for the Holidays

The four of us walked down Main Street, enjoying the Christmas hustle and bustle. It was a strange thing, being together. We hadn't really seen each other much since our high school graduation more than three years ago, but we were all home from college for the holidays and Julia said we should walk Main Street and see the decorations together. We were having a good time, but the ice had definitely not broken. You go away to college and you change, and your friends aren't sure who you are anymore; heck, maybe you aren't sure.

Even if none of us had changed, I wonder if we could have had the same experience on Main Street. Julia is the sweetest person you could ever meet, but she's agnostic, not sure about God and religion, and I doubt she saw nativity scenes and Christmas lights the same way I did as a Roman Catholic.

"Look at that guy in a Santa suit," Wesley interrupted my musing, his pale blue eyes narrowed under blond bangs. "What a crock!"

At least Julia could enjoy Christmas in an open, care-free way. Wesley comes from a very serious Christian family that actually left their previous church because they didn't believe celebrating Christmas is biblical. Wesley likes a winter party as much as the next guy, but he's constantly torn between indignation at the whole idea of a Christian takeover of pagan customs on the one hand and scorn on the other hand for the secular "Happy Holidays" phenomenon that takes the Christ out of Christmas. At any rate, a Salvation Army guy wearing a Santa suit offered a clear outlet for frustration.

"Is that a crock or is that more of a pot?" Steven asked, feigning innocence as he contemplated Santa's collection basket. He furrowed his bushy black eyebrows. "I've always wondered about the difference." Steven, always the comedian. He puzzled me even more than the others. Steven is a Roman Catholic too, or least he was before college, or at least he used to go to Mass on Sundays. But it didn't seem to mean the same thing for him as for me, and his constant stream of jokes was a kind of mask that kept anyone from seeing what he really thought. "But 'Santa' means 'saint,'" Steven continued in a mock-professorial voice, "and thou shalt not speak evil of saints."

"Aaaa, you don't know the first thing about Christmas, you papist," Wesley said, a sharp edge beneath his joking tone. "Where was Christ born?"

"Um, Philadelphia?" Steven pondered, scratching his chin dramatically.

"Wrong, try again."

"Pittsburgh!" Steven was playing dense.

"No, you doofus," Wesley reprimanded him, wagging a finger, "it was Bethlehem!"

"Well, I *knew* it was *somewhere* in Pennsylvania," Steven defended himself.

"Bethlehem, right: Isn't that where Mary and Joseph had to come back to their census?"

Julia rolled her eyes, and I began to think the evening would turn out badly. Maybe the ice was just too thick for us to recover whatever it was that had brought us together years ago.

"Yes it is," Wesley replied, ignoring the pun for the chance to show off some biblical knowledge. "A decree had gone out that all the world should be taxed—"

"Damn democrats," Steven muttered.

"Hey, this is fun!" Julia interrupted, trying to save the conversation, and maybe trying to make things feel fun by saying they were. She threw up her petite hands in a gesture of amazement: "It's crazy we haven't gotten together before. You guys wanna go see the riverfront sometime? We could go Christmas Eve."

Wesley lit up: “Yeah, that would be great!” I’m guessing Christmas Eve with his folks is kind of dismal; they’re probably careful *not* to have fun that night.

“Sure,” Steven chimed in, “I’ll be Adam, and I’ll say to my wife, ‘It’s Christmas, Eve!’”

“Great!” Julia smiled, sweetly ignoring the joke as she turned to me. “How about you?”

“Oh, it sounds like a lot of fun,” I said apologetically, “but I always go to the Christmas Eve vigil Mass with my family.” Wesley snorted and looked away while Steven feigned catastrophic disappointment. “Hey,” I added, feeling like I might chicken out on some kind of witness here, “it’s important to worship together.”

Julia was oil on the waters, like always. “That’s beautiful, how you all go together,” she answered, smiling. Then she frowned. *Shoot*, I thought: I forgot about her family situation—not a happy thing. But her frown was a thoughtful one: “You know, that’s something I’ve always wondered about: Isn’t worship something spiritual, something interior? I mean, I would say I’m a spiritual person, but it’s not something I wear on the outside. Why is Catholic worship an outward, visible thing?”

“I know what you mean,” I said, hoping I really did. “Well, if you see what we are doing, feel my hand, and look at yourself, you can see that you are a physical being who needs to do physical things. Catholics are people, humans, just like you, who need to do those same kind of things in their life. If you think about this time of year, Christmas, God became man to do those same things. Don’t you think it would be a little weird if God said, ‘Let me give you a body, but don’t use it, and I am going to do the same thing for myself’? Besides, we Catholics believe we worship as the Mystical Body of Christ, and bodies are visible; so that’s why we worship in ways you can see. It just depends on the nature of a body as a visible thing.”

Julia squinted, trying to understand. “That’s pretty deep stuff,” she said, “but I didn’t really follow what you said about the ‘mystical body of Christ.’ What do you mean by ‘mystical’?”

I dug back in memory to my Theology 401 class, trying to buy time by pretending to window shop. “It’s a way of contrasting the Church with other kinds of bodies. In a physical body, none of the parts has its own existence, each is only a part of the whole. But in the Mystical Body, Christians are united to Christ in such a way that, while they really are becoming Christ, they also retain their own personalities. The Body of Christ is built up in each one of us, so we are different from, say, a bee hive, or a commune, because in those bodies the members are only parts and the whole is the only important thing. Further, in a moral body, like a nation, only the common end unites its members, along with a juridical structure. But in the Mystical Body, there is a real, spiritual connection, even a shared life and mind between all the members. This is the Holy Spirit. It’s not just patriotism, or loyalty, or a common belief; it is much deeper than that.”

“That’s an amazing idea!” Julia seemed really into this, in whatever meditative, zen-like way she understood what I had said. “So what does it take to be a ‘member’ of this ‘body’? I mean, what does it take to be one-hundred percent, all the way ‘in’?”

Wesley was listening intently. Even if he’s combative about it, he really is serious about his faith, and my Roman Catholic answers were probably not like anything he had heard at home. Hoping he wasn’t fuming, I took a deep breath and said, “First, if you want to be all the way ‘in,’ you’ve got to have something called sanctifying grace. That just means you’ve got to share in the invisible, ‘mystical’ life the Church has from the Holy Spirit. Plus, you need to privately accept everything the Church teaches—you need to believe her Creed. And finally, you need to show public allegiance to the government of the Church. That is, you can’t *just*

privately believe what the Church teaches: you have to obey the rules and do stuff like go to Mass for special feasts like Christmas.”

By this point, Wesley was oblivious to the hustle and bustle around us, totally focused on the conversation. “When you say, ‘government,’ you mean things like the pope and the bishops and stuff, right?” he asked, pronouncing the word “pope” almost as though it were in scare quotes. “How does that system work? How does the pope relate to the bishops?”

Steven stepped in to take some of the pressure off me. “Well, it’s the same way that a bishop relates to his priests,” he said, sounding serious for once. “It’s kind of like a CEO and his employees.”

“Sort of,” I said, grateful to Steven for sharing the hot seat with me but reluctant to leave Wesley with the wrong idea. “The way the pope relates to bishops is actually pretty different from the way a bishop relates to his priests. The bishop, priests, and the Pope all have what’s called the sacrament of holy orders, and that means they can all do some pretty cool stuff that none of us can. But their offices or positions are really different. The bishop has authority over a certain area or ‘diocese,’ and the priests sort of extend his presence. They’re under his authority and there are some things the bishop can do that they can’t. But the bishops don’t just extend the Pope’s presence. The pope is one member of the whole group of bishops; but he’s their head, which means he can act with the authority of the whole group. He represents all of them put together. A bishop doesn’t ‘represent’ all the priests put together.”

By now I had realized that Julia had started asking me questions just to get us all talking together, and she had happily backed out when Wesley and Steven got going. But now she was enjoying herself, and she gently teased me, “Wow, the way you describe priests and bishops it sounds like this ‘sacrament of holy orders’ turns them into supermen. What all powers does this ‘sacrament’ give them?”

Steven struck a liturgical pose with his hands extended over the bread in a bakery window and intoned, mock-seriously, “Hocus pocus filiokus!”

Julia had been teasing, but Steven’s parody took things so far it felt vaguely disrespectful, especially since Steven is—was—sort of—Catholic. As awkward as it felt, I decided to take Julia’s question seriously. “Well, holy orders does give bishops and priests some pretty awesome powers. Essentially, Holy Orders give bishops and priests a special role in the Body of Christ as representatives of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. Bishops and priests are prophets in that they teach others about God, and they are kings in that they govern the faithful in spiritual matters. They exercise their priestly role by administering the sacraments. Priests can baptize, because anyone can baptize, but they can also administer Penance, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction, and they can witness Matrimony. The bishop can do all these as well as administer Confirmation and Holy Orders.”

Wesley was definitely taking the question seriously. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” he said, emphasizing how certain he felt by speaking as calmly and matter-of-factly as possible. “The First Letter of Peter, chapter two, verse ten says ‘But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation.’ According to Scripture, *all* Christians are priests, not just a few supermen.”

I was not about to get into a Bible quotation battle with Wesley. That guy knows his Bible backward and forward, and he can usually cite it verbatim. But I could at least explain what Catholics believe, so I did my best while not sounding confrontational about it. “You’re right,” I said, “every Christian is baptized, and baptism also gives us some pretty amazing powers. Anyone who is baptized also receives the role of priest, prophet and king, though in a

different way than priests and bishops. Christians are priests in that they are able to consecrate the secular world to God through their participation in the Body of Christ. They live in the world, but they also have Christ's life, and so they connect this world to Christ. Christians are prophets by teaching others about God and giving a good example of life in the Body of Christ. They are kings in that they can direct the world to God."

Wesley still looked smugly doubtful, but he was definitely listening. "Sure, but it's like Steven was doing: you think that special 'priests' can zappo ordinary bread into the body of Christ. You've gotta admit that's a bunch of medieval nonsense, right? Nobody thought that until the pope made it up so everyone would think his priests were super-important."

Walking through John 6 and 1 Corinthians 10 would have been good, but I didn't want to drag Julia and Steven through it all, and anyway I wasn't sure I could remember the exact phrasing of the texts. So I decided to stick to the witness of the early Church: "Actually, from the earliest days, the celebration of Christ's presence among us in the Eucharist was at the heart of Christian life. The letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop living in the second century, and a disciple of John the Evangelist, insist that the celebration of the Eucharist with the bishop and all his priests is the surest sign and cause of Christian unity. These letters clearly confess that Christ's body and blood, present under the sacramental species, is the source of the Church's unity, and that only the bishops and the priests he appoints have the power and authority to celebrate their mystery. The only way, Ignatius insists, to know that one is part of the Church is to attend the Eucharist presided over by the bishop and his priests."

Steven jumped in, but I wasn't sure if he was trying to distract Wesley or just be goofy. "Yeah, the Eucharist is really confusing," he said in a kind of comic dead-pan. "Sometimes I'm about to receive communion and the priest breaks the host in half, and I'm like, 'Oh man, did I just get half a Jesus? What a rip-off!'"

Wesley snorted, and I felt irritated at Steven. Being some kind of Catholic at least, it seemed like he could have helped me out instead of raising more questions. Keeping in mind how Julia and Wesley would hear me, I pretended I was talking to Steven: "But do you remember, Steve, when Fr. Peter told us in Confirmation prep how, in the miracle of the Eucharist, we are not looking at a mere illusion, but at the substance of Christ under the dimensive quantity of bread and wine? Or look at it this way: instead of Christ hiding within each host, each host is a portal to the substance of Christ as he exists in heaven. If you break a host in half, you make two portals, not ripping apart the space in which his body exists locally. This is so because we get to the physical accidents of Christ through his substance first. I know, it sounds kind of strange, since we usually get to the substance of a person through the physical accidents first."

But Wesley was not about to be distracted by Steven's jokes or my metaphysical niceties: he took the conversation straight back to the Bible. "Look, when you were talking about priests you said that the Mass is a 'sacrifice' offered to God. Hebrews 10:12 says that Jesus 'offered one sacrifice for sins forever,' so I don't see how a Catholic Mass can be a real sacrifice—or if it is, then you must think what Jesus did was not enough somehow. Isn't that right?" He looked intense, but not angry or even scornful. I hadn't convinced him I was right, but maybe I had started to convince him that I was thoughtful about my faith.

"Catholics believe the Mass is really a sacrifice," I said, "but that may not mean what you think. What we don't mean is that Christ is again brutally tortured and killed. What we do mean is that the same Priest and Victim of Calvary, Christ, offers and is offered in thanksgiving to the Father and for the forgiveness of sins. There are two parts of a sacrifice, the immolation of the

victim and the offering of the victim. In the Mass the immolation is symbolized in the separate aspects of bread and wine, but not repeated. What is repeated is the offering of the victim, which is a fitting way for the Mystical Body of Christ to share in the merits of the cross.”

“That makes a lot of sense of what the priest is doing, but I wonder about the rest of us,” Steven commented. To my surprise, he sounded completely serious, even reflective; the mask was down for a moment. “It’s always seemed to me like the Mass is a kind of show the priest puts on. He’s up there in the fancy clothes with the microphone, and we mostly just listen. He gives people lots of jobs so we won’t feel bad, you know, like reading the readings and bringing up the gifts and distributing communion and all kinds of things, but when you get right down to the center of it we all shut up and kneel down while he does the real action.” Steven glanced at Julia and Wesley apologetically and smiled, like maybe it wasn’t polite to talk Catholic frustration in front of people who hadn’t had the experience. “Do you think the people in the pews are offering the sacrifice somehow? Or are we just spectators?”

I was actually glad I could say more about the priesthood of all believers, for Wesley’s sake. “I know what you mean, but actually all baptized Christians offer the sacrifice of the Mass. First of all, the priest represents the people as their head; so we’re offering the sacrifice through his hands, as though he’s doing it for all of us. And it has a lot to do with our intention, too. You can’t just check out, even when you shut up and kneel down. You need to be joining your intention actively to what the priest is doing, so you’re doing it with him even though you’re not up at the altar. Most importantly, though, you’ve got to offer yourself too. When the priest offers the Eucharist, he’s offering Christ’s body—and we’re a part of his Mystical Body, the Church. In the Mass, we offer ourselves right along with the priest, as part of the sacrifice. If you really get that, you’ll see why the Mass is so important for Catholics.” Mimicking Wesley’s verbatim-Bible-citation tone, I continued, “As Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum concilium* says in paragraph 10, ‘The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.’”

“What does that mean?” Wesley asked. It seemed like he really wanted to know.

“Um,” I stalled, dismayed. How did I keep getting myself into these long answers? “Well, it means two things. First, that the liturgy, in one sense, is our final end. Our final end when we die is to be unified with God in heaven. While we are here on earth the liturgy allows us to become truly united with God. So in that sense the liturgy is the thing we are arriving at while we are on earth and after we die, the summit toward which we are directed. Secondly, it is also the way that we get there. We are called as Catholics to live the *vita liturgica* and this life includes all of the sacraments, along with prayers, liturgical devotions, and so on directed toward the Eucharist. The sacraments, for example, all dispose one to growing in holiness, and the liturgy provides us with the Eucharist, the spiritual nourishment, by which we grow. It is this power which is the source of the Church’s power to accomplish her mission: to have Christ living in each member throughout the earthly pilgrimage. Every day we have the ability to come into contact with our creator, to experience a taste of our final end, and to be immersed in the fullness of heaven on earth.”

Wesley and Steven were quiet and thoughtful, but Julia’s eyes were twinkling. “OK,” she said, poking me gently with her elbow, “so you really should go to the Christmas Eve vigil Mass.”

I could tell she meant it. I smiled back. “Wanna come?” She smiled, thought, and nodded. “How about you, Steven?” I asked, grinning. “It’s a great show, and our priest is quite a performer. And I could probably get you in for free!”

“Oh, sure thing!” Steven said, layering mock enthusiasm on top of real enthusiasm. “I’m all about the vigil. I’ve been to that show so many times I genuflect in movie theatres. If I were a bug, you know what I would be? Vigil ant. That’s what Christmas is all about!”

“Aaaa, you don’t know the first thing about Christmas,” Wesley sneered cheerfully, his voice all play. He pointed at a nativity scene: “You probably don’t even know why Jesus was born in a manger.”

“Sure I do,” Steven objected, “his parents were on Obamacare.”

While they went at it, I thought to myself that it sure was neat to see old friends. Crazy that we hadn’t thought to do this before. It was great to be home for the holy days.