

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink.

Not long ago I happened to open the top drawer of my bedroom dresser and there was a faded Valentine made of construction paper by my son, Lukas, now 23. The writing dated the Valentine (intended for a little girl in his class) to his third-grade year.

Here is what the Valentine said: “To: Haleigh N. From: Lukas H.” And then this: *Only Boy with Gold Bar*. I have no idea what sort of “gold bar” he was referring to. But he was the “only” boy who had one—a singular accomplishment among his peers. And this would help make an impression; a lucrative third-grade catch for young Haleigh. I smiled when I read the old Valentine because I saw myself in my son.

This starts early for all of us, doesn’t it? This need to justify our merit with accomplishment via resume. I’ve noticed that obituaries are much longer than they were when I left seminary thirty years ago, almost as if the dead are trying to outdo one another. I updated my resume recently and a little voice said, “Hey, this looks pretty darn good.” *The only boy with gold bar*. We all like to put our best foot forward in a world that tends to measure.

The scandal of Jesus washing feet (thus explaining Peter’s initial refusal) in John 13 on that night so long ago is that handling a filthy foot complete with sore bunions, calluses, and corns was something a “Lord” just did not do. A Lord! The church has the tendency to place Jesus on something of a shiny pedestal, ruling over heaven and earth with an impeccable resume, far removed from something like a grundgy foot. We don’t like our Lord getting down and dirty. In Sallman’s classic picture hanging from thousands of Sunday School walls, Jesus looks like he’s just stepped out of the shower from a Clairol makeover and has never broken a sweat in his life.

Saint Paul reminds the church: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Every time a congregation communes together, we proclaim to the surrounding community that the sacrificial life is the way that *brings* life. The reception of the bread and cup forms disciples to live the sacrificial way, the way of the foot washer. Without the bread and cup, you might have the best intentions in the world of living like a servant, but you will quickly run out of the sacrificial fuel to do so. Holy Communion is literally a blood transfusion for those called to “wash feet” in dark places. The Eucharist will soon become optional for those who flee the dark places by intent or default.

On the same night this meal was first instituted, Jesus said, “Love as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Try to love like Jesus without this meal, by way of personal resume alone. I predict you won’t be at it for very long.