

Let the Little Children Come

Reflections on Children's Communion Class

By The Rev. Gary Eichelberger

Last January, I had the opportunity to co-teach the Children's Communion class at Christ Church, and that experience continues to be one of the highlights of my time here. I will never forget the response that I received from one of the children when I asked them if they had any idea why we use wafers instead of loaves at communion. As I held up a loaf of bread and a communion wafer, the eyes of this particular seven-year-old widened, his hand shot up, and he exclaimed, "If you used a loaf of bread, some people might want a piece with crust – and others might want a piece with no crust . . ." Though I had never thought of it before, crust-free wafers clearly reduce the potential for rancor at the altar rail.

At Christ Church, the Children's Communion class is offered for children who are in second grade or older who want to deepen their understanding of what it means to come forward to the altar rail in church and receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Moreover, though many of the children in the class have already been receiving communion for some time, other children in the class are preparing to receive communion for the first time.

From time to time, I have the opportunity to speak with parents about the decision as to when their baptized children should begin receiving communion. Based on the tradition that was

in place during their childhood, some parents are inclined to have their children wait until after taking the Children's Communion class before they receive, and I understand the thinking behind that decision. (Though, when a baptized child has a strong desire to receive the Body of Christ and is prevented from doing so, Jesus' words in Matthew 19:14 do give me pause: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.")

When these opportunities for discussion arise, I often start by noting that my three children - who are now eight, five, and two - have never known a time when they were not welcome at the Lord's Table. Each of them was baptized as an infant and, as has been the custom for most of the first two thousand years of the church's history, received their first communion immediately after their baptism - as a culmination of their full initiation into Christ's Body the Church.

Though a more modern concern has dealt with whether infants and younger children can understand what is happening when they receive communion, I am reminded of the Sunday several years ago when my two year old son - after having received communion and returned to the pew with us - tapped me on the shoulder as I was kneeling in prayer. As I turned to look down

at him, he had cupped his empty hands together, extended them to me, and firmly proclaimed: "The Body of Christ."

After we receive the Body of Christ, we walk away from the altar as the fortified Body of Christ - ready to go out into the world to do the work that God has given us to do. Whether we begin receiving as infants, as children, or as adults, we can always benefit from further reflection on the mystery of the eucharistic feast. And so I look forward to the amazing things that our children will teach us as we gather for this next year's Children's Communion class.

Children's Communion Class is scheduled for Wednesdays, January 13 - February 3, in Graham Library. The children will participate in a special service and brunch on February 7. Please contact Hedrick Lewis, 282.3103 or hlewis@ccgsc.org, no later than Wednesday, January 6 to register your child.

