

Dear Friends in Christ,

So many people have commented on how nice the First Communion celebration was this past Sunday, and I would have to agree. I am so proud of the young children, and am delighted they have reached this milestone in their spiritual lives. I am also very proud of all those who helped to prepare the children. I know our teachers did an excellent job of instructing the second graders, and am grateful for their efforts. Our parish has an outstanding religious education program. As always it was a joy for me to see the excitement on the children's faces. I wasn't able to see their reactions to drinking from the cup, but I am told most of them probably prefer kool-aid to wine.

There were signs, however, that we as a parish have a lot of work to do especially in teaching parents about the sanctity of our worship, and its importance in our lives. So many of the parents who brought their children to the Sacrament of First Holy Communion hardly ever worship in this faith community. I know our situation is not unique. The truth of what I am saying is real in every parish in the country. However, it is also true that the problem is rather chronic here. I was amazed at the fact that so many of the families had absolutely no idea of what was happening in the liturgy, nor did they know when to be silent or how to participate appropriately. It felt more like we were at a graduation ceremony than a Mass in which we were celebrating the joy of these children coming to the Table of the Lord. What saddens me even more is that so many of these children will not be seen again until it is time for them to be confirmed.

These current second graders reflect the beginning of the third generation of children who are growing up in families with little or no religious upbringing. Since the time the reforms of Vatican II were implemented in the mid to late 1960's our Church has felt the impact of anger, apathy, and ignorance. At a time when the Church was trying to build unity we saw the beginnings of a major breakdown. Reactions to the reforms were volatile, and often hostile. We saw many priests and religious women and men leave their vocations for various reasons. Religious Education was changed from the Baltimore Catechism to fluffier nonsense about rainbows and butterflies and that's how much God loves us.

Since those days the Church has battled many demons. However, the greatest need we have right now is to find ways to reach out to people to let them know the Church is a necessary part of their lives. All of us who are baptized into the mystical Body of Christ have important roles to play in the building up of the Church; but how do we begin?

First of all, we have to acknowledge the situation, which is what I am trying to do in this letter. Of course, we're going to need a strategy, but here is where I have to honestly say I am at a loss. And so, we need to rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit for the moment. I hope people will understand that I am not trying to be judgmental or overly critical of the situation. I am simply trying to be honest about a very serious problem in our parish, and in the Church that needs to be addressed. I am saying we need to recognize the signs of the times, and they are not all that rosy at the moment. We need healing, encouragement, enthusiasm, and a willingness to proclaim the Gospel to a community that has been both deaf and mute far too long.

There is a prayer in the baptismal ceremony called *Ephphatha*, which is a Greek word meaning be opened, it goes like this: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father, Amen." My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts to the Good News of God's love, and that we will soon discover ways to proclaim that message to all who need to hear it.

In joyful hope,  
Fr. Tim Seigel