

WHO KNEW?

Each year during the heat of the summer months the Church Schedules Scripture readings that center on Christ as the Bread of Life. This year is no exception. In order to help us all focus our attention on the Eucharist I would like to relate to you a story from the recent past.

You all remember that from March to June 2020 our whole country and much of the world was in lockdown because of the corona-virus. On the last Saturday of April 2020 we were scheduled to have our annual celebration of First Communion with approximately 55 second graders. But because of the health risks that did not happen. We did have an abbreviated First Communion late in September but we also had about twenty of our First Communicants receive at the 10:30 Sunday Mass. Five at a time for four Sundays.

This April we were able to be out and about and we held our regular First Communion but instead of sitting all our little ones upfront as a class we had them sit with their family members—moms and dads and grandparents. Keeping social distancing. This was my thirtieth First Communion as Pastor here at Saint Anthony's. I have sometimes used a story or recounted an event for the current First Communicants even though I may have used it before on occasion.

This year though the Lord put on my heart a memory from my own childhood. My Nana once told me that she was twelve years old when she made her First Communion. I was seven years old. So was my mother. My Nana was born in 1890 and made her first Communion in 1902. My mom was born in 1916 and made her first communion in 1923. So, between 1902 and 1923, the age for the reception of First Holy Communion was changed. Who did that? It turns out that it was Pope Saint Pius X.

Pope Pius X knew that the age for receiving Communion was twelve and had been for centuries. He personally thought that this was too long for children to wait. He believed they started to get interested in other things and the faith was waning. He also believed that when children were about seven years old they had enough of a grasp of Jesus coming to them that they could worthily receive the sacrament. But he was aware that changing the age after so many years would be upsetting to a lot of people.

In Ireland around 1904 there was a small Catholic family whose last name was Organ, from County Cork. There were two boys and one girl when the mom became pregnant. She gave birth to a little girl but the mother did not survive. The dad tried valiantly to raise his little family of four but it proved too much. He asked the Irish Christian Brothers to take and raise his two boys and the Good Shepherd Sisters to raise his two girls. The new born was named Nellie and she too had very frail health like her mother.

But this little girl had the gift of great faith and whenever the nuns would take her into Chapel she would call out for Holy God. Even though she was still only three or four years old. When she was around 4 ½ years old the doctors told the Sisters that she was probably not going to live to see the age of five. The Sisters petitioned the local bishop to have the little girl receive her First Holy Communion even though she was so young. It would actually be Viaticum, receiving Holy Communion before you die. The bishop granted his permission and the nuns had a white First Communion dress for Little Nelly. She made her Communion and actually received a number of other

times before she died. At her funeral she was laid out in her little white dress. Then her father died. Nellie had been buried in a cemetery plot but the Good Shepherd Sisters who had raised her and grown so fond of her again petitioned the bishop to have little Nellie exhumed and buried in the Convent Cemetery so they could pray for her and visit her grave. Eventually permission was granted. The little girl's casket was exhumed. When they opened the casket they were astounded to find that the body had not decayed even though it was over a year and a half. Such an occurrence is rare and over the centuries has been recognized as a sign of holiness. The Sisters and the local priest thought this little girl was a saint. They told the bishop. The bishop in turn notified the Vatican and eventually the Pope himself was informed about the life of this little girl.

Pope Pius X had been praying to God for a sign from heaven indicating that the Lord wanted the age of First Communion to be lowered to seven years. Hearing about little Nellie he immediately interpreted this as the sign he was praying for. In 1910, Pope Pius X lowered the age for the reception of First Holy Communion to seven.

Once I learned all this I decided to tell this whole story to this past April's First Communion Class and to their families because they were all around seven years of age themselves. I did so and it was a story that most had never heard before. A little over three weeks ago I received a small package from Ireland. In it was a little 90-page booklet and a letter. Here is part of what the letter said:

Dear Msgr. McHenry,

Some weeks ago we attended a First Communion Mass at which you officiated. Among the participating children was our grand daughter, Katie... It was a lovely ceremony that was enhanced by your reference to the unofficial saint of County Cork, Little Nellie of Holy God, and that she was the reason that Catholic children receive Communion at the age of seven. During her short life, Nellie lived on Spike Island in Cork Harbour where her father, William, served as a soldier in the British Army. Spike Island is directly across from where we live on the mainland. And looking out the window I can plainly see it right now. Listening to you on that happy day brought home to us the fact that the world is indeed a small place and we are all interlinked in some way or another in a common humanity. Maria, my wife includes a little book that deals with the history of Little Nellie. She hopes you will like it.

Kindest regards, Maria and Barry Collins

My friends, here is the book. It is a series of testimonies from the Sisters who raised little Nellie and loved her. But the whole episode is a testimony to the presence and activity of our God. The Eucharist is Christ's great gift to us. It is truly food for our journey through life. The Lord knows what we really need—even better than we do. And one of those things we need the most is the Bread of Life. Communion. Come. Be fed. At the table of the Lord. You, my friends, and I, are his most welcome guests at the banquet of life.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.