My ministries in the last ten years have provided me with the opportunity to engage in ecumenical dialogues and activities. One observation I have is this: all Protestant denominations regard their Communion services with the greatest respect, reverence, solemnity, piety. Lutherans, Methodists, Wesleyans, Christian Reformed, Assembly of God and many others know from the Scriptures and believe in their souls that the “bread of heaven,” spoken of in today’s gospel, is a most sacred, special, grace-filled event. The people know it in their minds, believe it in their soul, and demonstrate it in their conduct as they receive the Eucharist.

Catholic and Protestant theologians use different terminology to try to explain and to teach the transformation of ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Since the Last Supper the church has taught this is the body and blood of Christ. In the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch taught, “become what you receive.” In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas applied the philosophical insights and terminology of Aristotle to present the concept of transubstantiation. In the 16th century, Martin Luther rejected transubstantiation in favor of his teaching called consubstantiation. Within two years, Luther’s followers began the process of disagreeing with and breaking from him. Within 60 years, Protestants had proposed 200 interpretations, explanations and beliefs in the Eucharist. By 1900 in the USA, there were 1900 Protestant denominations. Today, in the USA, Protestants have burgeoned into 44,000 denominations. One of my Protestant minister friends observes, “in the Catholic Church, when someone has a new insight, they form a new religious community. When a Protestant has a new idea, he or she forms a new denomination!” Ironically, as the Catholic Church works towards unifying religious groups, the Protestants are multiplying churches.

We thank God for the 2,000 tradition of belief in the body and blood of Jesus. We believe that we receive what Jesus offered to us at the Last Supper. In receiving this gift, we receive a share in his divine life. For the last thousand years, we refer this gift as a sacrament, using the language of the times. A sacrament is an outward effecting what it signifies.

A couple of questions. What is the prayr that you whisper as you prepare to receive our Lord in the Eucharist: before Mass, during Mass, in the Communion procession. What is the prayer that you hold in your heart as you leave Mass and live your day?

A funny story. When I was a child, the entire O’Malley family would travel to Mass in the family car. In front of church, my mom and dad and all nine children would pour out of our Chevy like clowns from a circus car. People would stare at us and wonder how do all those people fit in one little car? Thank God, we O’Malley’s were all small; I am the second tallest person in my family! After Mass, we would repeat the circus act of our piling back into the car. Inevitably, pushing, shoving, arguing, fighting would
erupt. My mother would say on many Sunday mornings, “Children, stop fighting. Remember what you have just received. Our Lord lives inside you. Show it by how you behave.” My mother, not a theologian but a very wise woman and good Catholic, was teaching us what St. Ignatius of Antioch had said in 107 AD, “become what you receive.”

We thank God for the gift of Jesus’ body, the gift of his bread from heaven, which satisfies us constantly now and for eternity. May we become what we receive.