

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, Year B
2 Sam 7:1-5,8-11,16; Ps 89:2-5,27,29; Rom 16:25-27; Lk 1:26-38

SACRED CONTENTS, SACRED VESSEL

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, December 17, 2011, 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 18, 2011, 9:30 a.m.

It is very close to Christmas now, only a few days away,
and almost everyone will receive one or more packages,
so this is an opportune time to examine the principles of packaging.

When it comes to packaging,
the package needs to fit the contents.

Here is a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch,
one of my favorite breakfast cereals.
My brother's wife introduced me to this tasty breakfast delight up at the cabin,
and I've enjoyed it for several years now.
Let's look at the package: cardboard on the outside,
and the inner liner is sealed plastic (almost like waxed paper).
The cereal is wheat and sugar and cinnamon.
If it is going to remain fresh,
if it is going to keep from getting stale,
the package needs to be airtight.
The package needs to fit the contents.

When Fr. John Floeder was here,
we had Sugar Pops in the cupboard.
It has a different sort of liner, aluminum foil.
The sugar content is so high that plastic is not good enough.
The foil does a better job preserving freshness and keeping the insects out.
The package needs to fit the contents.

Here is a container of dry roasted peanuts.
The container is tin.
The top is aluminum foil.
When we peel back the top it goes psssst.
It is vacuum packed to keep the dry roasted peanuts dry.
The package needs to fit the contents.

Here is an extra-large bottle of salsa.
Now that Fr. Fernando is in the rectory, salsa is consumed in large volumes.
The container is glass.
It is hard to get the top off.
Sometimes a rubber gripping device is needed.

It is vacuum packed.
After it is opened, it needs to be kept in the refrigerator.
The package needs to fit the contents.

One container is glass, the next tin, the next cardboard and plastic or aluminum foil.
Wheat requires one kind of package, peanuts another, and salsa another.

Let's shift our discussion to spiritual matters.

The most valuable treasure that we have here at Mass is the Eucharist.
The consecrated bread is the Body of Christ.
The consecrated wine is the Precious Blood.
It is the most precious treasure we have,
and the vessels that we use to hold them need to reflect this
because the package needs to fit the contents.

Over the years we have used a variety of vessels to hold the Eucharist.

Here is a ceramic plate and cup that I received as a gift for my ordination.
Ceramic and clay vessels have been very popular.
When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper
Jesus and the disciples most likely used very ordinary tableware.
Most people were poor and used ordinary cups and plates.
Ceramic and clay were used to resemble what was probably used at the first Last Supper.

To stress the simplicity of the meal, sometimes the cup and plate were made of wood.

Here at St. Stephen's, for those of you who have been here longer, you may remember
the large glass flagon used to bring up the wine,
and the glass goblets that were used as communion cups,
and the large glass bowl that was used for as the ciborium.
The main reason for glass was so that the Eucharistic could be seen,
to draw more attention to the Eucharist,
to give the Eucharist more prominence.

The packaging needs to fit the contents.
In the case of the Eucharist, the contents are sacred, so the vessel must be sacred:
sacred contents, sacred vessel.

In 2004 the Church issued a special instruction: *Redemptionis Sacramentum*.
Because the Eucharist is so valuable,
the instruction says the vessels must be "truly noble" (*RS*, No. 117).
Ceramic, clay, glass, and wood – once approved – are no longer approved.
Maybe you have noticed how all of these items mysteriously vanished.
"Common vessels" are no longer allowed,
anything we might use at a normal meal, because this is not a normal meal.

Vessels “made from glass, earthenware, clay,
or other materials that break easily” (*RS*, No. 117) are not to be used.

With the Eucharist, we have sacred contents, so the Eucharist must have a sacred vessel.

The Eucharist is contained in precious metals:

gold, silver, bronze, or pewter, the ones most frequently used.

Here are some beautiful examples.

This is the chalice from our new set of sacred vessels: hammered gold.

The smaller Communion cups and Communion plates all match: hammered gold.

Remember, sacred contents, sacred vessel.

This is the chalice that my parents gave to me for my ordination,
beautifully made in Spain by extremely talented artisans.

It is bronze on the outside, and pure gold on the inside.

This is Fr. Karl Wittman’s chalice.

Fr. Karl was pastor here from 1966 to 1978.

He was pastor when this new church (1970) was built.

Before he died several years ago

he bequeathed his chalice to this parish that was so dear to his heart.

The chalice is a beautiful combination of gold, silver, and other precious metals.

This chalice gives maximum respect and reverence to the Precious Blood.

Remember, sacred contents, sacred vessel.

In the first reading at this Mass from the Second Book of Samuel,
we heard about the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark contained the items that were most sacred to the Jews,

things that were part of the Exodus journey, the forty-year trip through the desert.

Three sacred objects were contained in the Ark of the Covenant:

the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments,

a golden pot of manna, a sample of the food God provided for them in the desert;

and the staff used by Moses and Aaron to touch the Nile River,

to part the Red Sea, and to get water from the rock.

These were truly sacred contents, and they demanded a sacred vessel.

The Ark was built of acacia wood.

It had a ring on each of the four corners so two long poles could be inserted for carrying.

There were two statuettes of angels of the cherubim mounted on the top.

The entire chest and all of its adornments were gold plated.

The Ark of the Covenant was exquisite.

It was made with the best wood, the best precious metal.

Remember, sacred contents, sacred vessel.

In the gospel, we hear the beautiful story of the Annunciation.

We hear how the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary (Lk 1:35),

and how she the infant in her womb would be “the Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:32).

One of Mary's titles is the Ark of the Covenant.

Please remember, now, our principles of packaging.

The package needs to fit the contents.

Sacred contents, sacred vessel.

If Jesus is all-holy, sinless, the Son of God, and the Word made flesh – sacred contents,
and if Jesus is contained in Mary's womb,

What does that mean about Mary?

What does that mean about her womb, the container, the sacred vessel,
and by extension, to her whole body, her entire being?

Mary was without sin.

Mary was immaculately conceived, without sin from the beginning,
and she lived a good and holy life from infancy to her dying day

Mary was pure, spotless, blameless, innocent, undefiled.

Mary was pure goodness; she was "full of grace" (Lk 1:28).

Actually, this is the only way that Jesus could be born among us.

Jesus, once conceived, was sacred contents.

It would be unthinkable for the Son of God to be carried in a tarnished or dirty vessel.

God needed a sacred vessel to carry his Son.

Mary is that sacred vessel, the new Ark of the Covenant.

The contents (Jesus) far exceeded two stone tablet, a golden pot, or a staff.

The vessel (Mary's body) far exceeded acacia wood and gold plating.

It is extremely important if sacred contents are to be treated with the respect they deserve,
that the sacred contents be carried in a sacred vessel.

When it came to Jesus conceived in Mary's womb,

it followed the principles of spiritual packaging: sacred contents, sacred vessel.

The same Holy Spirit that overshadowed Mary in Nazareth
will come down upon this altar at this Mass.

During the Eucharistic Prayer the priest will extend his hands over the bread and wine,
and flowing from God above through the priest

the Holy Spirit will overshadow the bread and wine

and the Holy Spirit will transform them into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

The same Jesus that was conceived in Mary's womb,

the same Jesus who died on the Cross for us,

will be really present on this altar.

Then at Communion time,

we will file forward, one-by-one, to these Communion stations

to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

If we are going to receive Jesus, the most of all sacred contents,
and if Jesus is going to take up residence within each of us,
what does that mean about each of us as vessels?

We need to be sacred vessels.

We are not immaculate like Mary,
but we must grow in holiness and root out all sin.

As it says in the prayer before we receive Holy Communion:

“Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof,
but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

We are invited to receive Jesus in Communion,
the same Jesus born of Mary on the first Christmas.

Our challenge is to be more sacred as vessels,
to grow in goodness and grace so we might carry Jesus better ourselves,
and once Jesus is within us,
to leave this church and carry Jesus to others.

We it comes to the Ark of the Covenant, to Mary, and to you and me,
the principles of packaging apply:
if the contents are sacred, the vessel also must be sacred.