

How many of you here had a vinyl record player when you were younger? We had one right up until the late 1990s along with a large wooden crate filled mostly with dad's 12-inch records in their clear plastic sleeves. As a boy, I remember helping dad carefully remove records from their sleeves to play, making sure not to touch the surface. We'd place it on the turntable, lift the tonearm, and gently lower the needle onto the outer edge of the record. I would watch in fascination as the needle followed the grooves and somehow transformed those tiny indentations into music.

In a sense, we are a bit like vinyl records. Much of our lives run along grooves that have been formed over time. We develop routines that help us navigate each day: morning routines, exercise routines, ways of greeting people, and even ways of praying. Those grooves can be helpful, but they can also become so familiar that we stop thinking about why we do what we do.

Mass is one area of life where this can easily happen. We can slip into the habit of thinking that we're here simply to receive Holy Communion and then go home, as though Mass exists primarily to satisfy a personal need or fulfil an obligation. But did you know that a Catholic is only obliged to receive Holy Communion once a year? (CCC1389). The obligation is not about **receiving** Communion but about **gathering** together to worship God - together. When we celebrate Eucharist, there's very little that is individual about what we do. This is why **welcoming** before, singing during and **hospitality** afterward are not optional extras but constitutive elements of what it means to gather as the Body of Christ.

For the third week in a row, our Gospel reading contains Jesus' teaching about mission. Two weeks ago, the disciples were told: "*Proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.*" Last week, Jesus repeated three times, "*Do not be afraid.*" Today, he speaks about both the obstacles and the opportunities that disciples who are on mission experience.

Jesus names one obstacle very directly: **our misplaced priorities**. "*Anyone [he says], who **prefers** family more than me is not worthy of me.*" These are **confronting** words. Yet Jesus isn't asking us to love our families **less** but asking us to love him **first** because when we allow Jesus to occupy the centre of our lives, everything else finds its proper place. Even when following him creates tension or misunderstanding, he remains the **source** from which every other relationship receives its meaning.

The same principle can apply to how we gather for Mass. We may **prefer** to sit by ourselves, to not **sing**, or to not **greet** people. We may even **prefer** to leave immediately after we've received Holy Communion or as soon as the final blessing has taken place. Yet if our preferences prevent us from making a gift of ourselves to others in the gathered Body of Christ, then they can become **obstacles** to the flow of God's grace. That's challenging stuff but being a disciple is **always** challenging because Jesus **always** calls us beyond ourselves. The woman in our first reading provides a beautiful example. She doesn't just say hello to the prophet, Elisha, as he passes by, she **presses** him to stay and share a meal. Her hospitality is active, generous and intentional because in the

ancient world, travellers depended on hospitality for survival. The need today is different, but it is no less real.

What is **needed** here in **this** faith community is **attentiveness** to the *deafening silence of the lonely person*, **compassion** for the *harsh words of the insecure person*, and **courage** to *bridge the hesitant distance of someone who longs to belong*. Unless we are visitors ourselves, each of us shares responsibility for creating that culture of welcome in order **to be a vibrant community that actively accompanies people to encounter Jesus** because, as He says, "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me." This is why the welcome **before** and what happens **after** Mass matters so much - neither are separate from the Eucharist but are two **of** the ways the Eucharist continues to bear fruit.

So what is the antidote to those grooves that can keep us stuck? Perhaps, metaphorically speaking, it is to scratch the record. To interrupt the patterns that keep us focused on ourselves and our preferences by greeting someone we don't know with genuine curiosity and learning their name. Inviting someone to hospitality and conversation. Noticing and responding to the person standing alone. To offer ourselves, however imperfectly, to another person. When we do this, we **become** the kind of parish family God is calling us to be: a family where **every** person is **known, loved and celebrated**; a family that worships with one voice and one heart; a family that, like the psalmist today, rejoices in the Lord's love, truth, goodness, justice and favour because we are coming to know not merely ideas about Jesus, but Jesus Christ himself.