

Last week, we saw how the church used the wedding image to speak of the passionate love God has for us, how much God wants to be one with us, and how this love will be played out during the 34 weeks of Ordinary Time.

Today, our three readings further define the relationship God wants to have with us. I don't know if you noticed it: the context of all three readings is the **gathered community**. **In the first reading** (from Nehemiah), Ezra the priest gathers “the men, women, and those children old enough to understand,” and he reads the law to them “from daybreak until midday,” and they all “listened attentively to the book of the law,” and respond with great joy. **In the second reading**, Paul writes to the Corinthian community using the image of the body – a letter that certainly would have been read aloud in the context of the assembled community. He describes how every member of the community is important: it is only *together* – each fulfilling their individual function – that they make up the body of Christ, and can function like a body. **In the gospel**, the context is the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day. Jesus stands up to do the reading – a reading which summarizes his mission – his reason for coming into the world, and he declares that “today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

These readings emphasize how critically important the gathered community is: it is there, within the context of the gathered community, that God comes, and makes his love present. One of the identifying characteristics of the Catholic Church is the central role

the church plays in our relationship with God. In our church, our faith isn't just a "me-and-God" relationship; the church is centrally involved in our relationship with God. God wants to relate to us through the community.

Gathering is a critically important part of being church. It is here within the *gathered* assembly, that we get re-focused, empowered, renewed, nourished, and fed, in order to be the Body of Christ when we leave here and go out there into the world. Here, we are reminded that we are more than the sum of our individual selves. Here, we are reminded who we are, what we are: a People of God. With this knowledge reaffirmed, we are strengthened to return to our place out there. With our sense of God's special presence here, we are ready to see his face everywhere out there.

To be Catholic is to be part of a community that gathers. That's part of our core identity.

This has important implications for us. There are two announcements I would like to make at this time, which are impacted by our belief in the importance of the community.

Announcement concerning the *Annual Catholic Appeal*

The first has to do with our responsibility for others beyond our own parish – others who are served by our *Annual Catholic Appeal*. This week, all registered members of all parishes in the diocese will receive a letter from the Bishop, initiating this year's *Annual Catholic Appeal*. This is what used to be called the *Diocesan Services Appeal*. At this

point, it's very important to understand that there are two phases to this appeal. The first phase is what we might call the "direct mail" phase. The second phase is what's called the "in pew" phase. We are asked to participate in one phase or the other – the first or the second, not both.

This week's letter from the Bishop is the first phase – the "direct mail" phase. The bishop's letter will invite you to make a contribution or a pledge to contribute.

The second phase will take place on the first weekend of March; this will be the "in pew" phase. Everyone who does not respond to this week's letter will be asked to complete a commitment card in the pew on that weekend. Again, I want to emphasize: You are asked to participate in either one phase or the other, not both. If you choose to respond to the bishop's appeal letter this week, you are not expected to make another pledge in March. So, it's one or the other; not both.

#### Announcement concerning the Departure of Mary Therese

My second announcement affects us very closely and personally. Our realization and appreciation of the importance and value of the community helps us. After serving here in our parish for 12 years, Mary Therese has experienced a call to move on to another mission in life. She made this decision after much prayer and reflection. I know that I will miss her very much, as will most of us I think. It's been a pleasure working with her these past 10 years. We appreciate all she has done for our parish. Her competence and

generosity, her singular devotion to God's will and commitment to involve everyone in church has helped the parish move in the direction of becoming a true community of God's people. She won't be leaving immediately – not until sometime this summer, and will assist in the transition. We certainly wish her well as she continues to respond to God's call to ministry.