

## Reflection for Ellen Jennings' Ordination

November 18, 2007  
Christ Congregational Church  
Rabbi Harold S. White

Let me express my thanksgiving for being asked to participate in this ordination service for Ellen Jennings. I can only reiterate the joy of the Psalmist:

“Zeh Hayom Asah Adonai, Nagilah v’Nesmach Bo.”

“This is the day which God has made. Let us rejoice and be glad thereon.”

I have thought a great deal about the word “communion.” Martin Buber makes the distinction between communion and communication. For Buber, communication involved the art of verbal articulation. Communion, which Buber regarded as the higher made of human interfacing, was non-verbal and more intense. Actually Buber came to this realization through his relationship with his Siamese cat. He and the feline would look into each other’s eyes and enjoy an amazing non-verbal dialogue. Buber realized that communion could transcend the realm of human to human and enable homo sapiens to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the realm of flora and fauna.

Several years ago I engaged in a conversation with a respected Jesuit colleague concerning the concept of trans-substantiation. I have always been fascinated by the fact that the act of communion is referred to as the Lord’s Table. He prefaced his reply with the qualification that the answer would be considered heretical even by some generally liberal Jesuits. He shared with me his belief that the Eucharistic table enabled individuals to transcend their prejudicial feelings and to share a meal with people whom you would

not ordinarily invite to your home for dinner. This reply brought to mind a statement from the Talmud in the section known as The Ethics of the Fathers; namely that “three people who have eaten a meal together but have not shared words of Torah, their meal indeed has been in vain.”

Sharing a meal is the embodiment of communion. Every one of us, however, must transcend our narcissistic needs and particularism to partake of God’s table. We must make ourselves worthy in both mind and deed before we can share in a common meal with our brothers and sisters.

I would like to share an experience with you. When I was a graduate student and seminarian I would visit various synagogues and churches to be enlightened by impressive sermons and be inspired by great music. The former need was satisfied at the Riverside Church in New York City by the preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick and at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where I marveled at the homiletical genius of James Pike. My need for great ecclesiastical music was satisfied at St. Paul’s Catholic Church adjacent to Columbus Circle. This Paulist Church was graced by the presence of the St. Paul Choristers, young male students at the church’s parochial school. After my ordination I had not visited the church until 1999, forty years after I had left New York. My return visit occurred as a result of a rendezvous that I had arranged with a group of my Catholic students who were home in the greater New York area for Thanksgiving break. When they learned that I would be in Manhattan for a theater binge, they asked if we could get together for Sunday brunch at what had been a favorite haunt during my

student days, the Café de Artists. I suggested that we preface brunch by attending Mass at St. Paul's where I eagerly anticipated hearing nostalgically the current boy choristers. We walked into the church and I was shocked at its state of disrepair. There had been no boy choristers since the parochial school had closed in 1973. The sanctuary was filled with the homeless who had sought refuge from the cold on that blistery November morning. Sitting directly in front of our pew a gay male couple were exhibiting affection towards one another. One of my students remarked, "Why didn't you take us to St. Patrick's on Fifth Avenue?" Another commented on what he perceived to be a foul smell in the sanctuary. The third and fourth members of the gathering vented their homophobic orientations. The Gospel was proclaimed and the celebrant began to deliver the homily. He shared a personal story with the congregation. He was now senior pastor of the church and was the last graduate of the parochial school. The homily was a sharing of an event that occurred when he was a novice at the Seminary. He recounted how he had served a parish in Westchester County as a youth minister. During Advent, he noted the presence of a derelict individual sitting in the middle of the great hall of Grand Central Station as the young priest prepared to board the commuter train to Larchmont. The disheveled figure was not panhandling nor did he hold a sign indicating his purpose for being in the station. No one including the young novice attempted to communicate with him. The figure continued to remain on the floor of the station during the entire period of Advent. On Christmas Eve the young priest finally decided to make inquiry of the man. "Who are you?" he asked. The reply was, "Jesus Christ." "How audacious of you!" exclaimed the novice, "How can you possibly take on the identity of our Lord?" The retort of the disheveled figure ended the conversation, "You, father, should know better than anyone

else! Have you forgotten Jesus' reply to the apostles when they inquired, 'How shall we find you Master when you are no longer physically present to us.' Jesus answered, 'You must find the Christ in the faces of your fellow men, even in the least among them.' Father, I am indeed the least among them."

The homily ended and the Eucharistic service began. None of my students proceeded to the altar rail to receive communion. None of them spoke to me or to each other until the Mass had ended. Even though I intuited the answer, I asked, "Why did you not take communion?" The reply was what I had hoped to hear, "Rabbi, we were not worthy to partake of the Lord's Table because of our comments before the Mass had begun." I thought of the paradox. I was worthy, but could not eat at the table because I was not a baptized Catholic. We did not go to Café de Artists for brunch. The power of the homily and the abstinence from the Eucharistic meal had, in this instance, a miraculous effect. They did not treat me to brunch. Collectively, upon their return to Washington, they made a donation in my honor to SOME (So Others Might Eat) and Martha's Table. They also became weekly volunteers at the Zaccheus Soup Kitchen. I learned how powerful the ritual of the communion table can be both in theory and in practice.