

I've just returned from a 30 thirty-day Ignatian, silent retreat at a retreat center in South Dakota. On the last day there, I heard a story from a priest. Fr. Bill (I won't use his last name because I didn't ask him if I could use this story – but he isn't from this diocese), Fr. Bill was recently watching an old video of his parents' wedding. And there was footage from the reception. His mother and father were filmed feeding each other pieces of the wedding cake: ceremony meant to symbolize to one's spouse, "I will take care of you, feeding you and providing for you with all the love and sweetness of my heart."

That scene struck Fr. Bill forcefully because, as his mother grew infirm with age and could no longer feed herself, his father sat with her at every meal, every day, and spoon-fed her bite by bite. At the very beginning of their life together they had promised to feed one another by means of their marriage, Fr. Bill said, and that was literally how it happened up to the end.

People have asked me how my 30-day retreat went, what I got out of it. It's hard to sum up an experience like that. But one of the prominent gifts of the month was the challenge from God to receive love well. What do I mean? In our Gospel this week we continue reading John 6. Jesus tells His disciples to work "for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." We need to be fed. (Think here of Fr. Bill's Dad and Mom). Jesus came among us to save us from spiritual starvation and eternal death, by feeding us with His love. If we don't allow ourselves to be fed by God, we'll be lost.

Sometimes we think the hard part is giving love. We think of all our sins, our failures to be who God wants us to be. People can be so hard, to love! Our real challenge, we think, is to be able to show love, even to those people. And there's certainly that call – and it's not easy.

But for me, one theme of the retreat was how difficult it is for me to accept graciously the love shown me. There are various ways this is a challenge – and I don't think just for me. On the one hand, we can resist

the love offered us because we want to be the one who serves – does the feeding. One of the directors of the retreat mentioned this in a homily. The priests directing the retreat had been invited one night to dinner at the house of a staff member at the retreat center. He said that it was hard for him when another priest got up and cleared off the table after dinner. He wanted to be the one doing that. He should be the one doing that. He had failed in being generous, he thought. It can be hard to receive acts of service, words of affection, or praise. We tell ourselves, we should be doing the giving. That's what Jesus told us to do! And in that guilt we can fail to open our hearts to the blessing of God that's in the love He and others give to us.

On the other hand, it can also be a challenge for us to accept the love shown us because we can simply presume it. How easy it is not to notice or value the love given us. Of course, someone will clear my plate off! I deserve it! Sometimes it gets to the point that we don't even notice, let alone thank, others for their acts of love - and so it's not

“received” in the sense of being appreciated for what it is – love. And, therefore, our relationships stagnate or die because they aren’t nourished by the love of others that is given, but not received by us.

Recent personal examples: On the retreat we had two days on which we could talk and leave the retreat center. On these days I travelled with a couple of seminarians who were also making the retreat. It’s a rule among priests that when we’re with seminarians the priest pays for everything – meals, tickets, gas, whatever. Well, for two outings I had paid the seminarian’s way for all that. At the end of the second day we were ordering ice cream at the Dairy Dog in Yankton, South Dakota. One seminarian, Jeremey, was feeling guilty. “I want to at least pay for the ice cream. You’ve paid for so much.” But I told him, “Just be quiet and accept your ice cream. It’s the rule.” He did.

But then just this past Wednesday, Fr. Chad and I went to Archbishop Hunthausen’s funeral together. The past several times we drove together I insisted on paying for parking. After all, he was driving.

It was his gas. I didn't want to be a leech. But this time Fr. Chad said, "It's my turn. You're just going to have to let me do this for you." And I remembered the retreat -- and shut up and enjoyed the free ride.

So it is with God and us. Jesus is the Bridegroom and we members of the Church are His Bride. Jesus wants to feed His Bride with wedding cake, if we'll let Him. Going back to Fr. Bill: his mother had to accept and receive being fed by her bridegroom. It sometimes seems that in such situations it would be more difficult to play the part of his Father, who needed to give so much time and love feeding his wife. But it is also very difficult to receive that love and help graciously. It can be hard to let oneself be loved!

But we must allow God (and others) to do it. He wants to give us so much more love than we suppose, experience, or accept. He wants to feed us – with Himself. Of course, that means, first and foremost, in the Eucharist. In the Gospel Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." He will feed and nourish our souls with Himself as our food, if we let Him.

But even beyond the Eucharist, God's grace and love is all around us, if we would only be willing to receive it. Holiness isn't, ultimately, something we achieve ourselves. It is a void, a hunger, we discover in ourselves, and then allow God to fill. In what ways are we each failing to allow God and other people to do that -- love us?