

A Clump of Grass, a Corkscrew — Signs of Peace

Something to Think About

Brian Cavanaugh tells a story about a missionary who made regular monthly trips to a small South Pacific island. There he would do ordinary pastoral work: celebrate Mass, baptize children, witness marriage vows, anoint the sick, and pray for the recently deceased. The people in one particular village practiced a custom whenever the priest landed in his seaplane.

The village chief was always the first to greet the padre when he landed. They would hug; then the chief gave a clump of grass to the priest. The priest blessed the clump, gave it back to the chief, who in turn gave it to whoever is standing next to him, who gave it to the person next to him, who gave it to the next, until everyone in the village has passed it. Finally, the clump of grass comes back to the priest.

The clump goes through household after household. According to island custom, the chunk of earth with its tuft of grass is a sacred reminder of God's presence to these people who live in isolation on their island. They consider the clump a symbol of unity and peace, especially important to people forced into close community. The clump of grass tells all the others that you are in unity with them. There is no anger or resentment or hatred between you, your family, neighbors, God.

The ritual is complete when the clump is back in the hands of the priest, and at this point Mass can begin — not before.

On one visit, the priest blessed the clump, passed it to the leader, and began making preparations for Mass as the dirt made its way around the village. As the customary time for Mass approached, word came to the priest that there would be a delay.

There was a bitter disagreement between a father and son in one household, and the clump of earth had not been exchanged between them.

There was no celebration of Mass that month. Or the next. Or the next. It took a full three months before peace was restored to that family and to the island village.