

### 3. The Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

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At the end of the Jubilee year marking two millennia of Christian history, Pope John Paul II proposed a “program” for the Church in the new millennium: “to contemplate the face of Christ.” In his 2003 encyclical on the Eucharist, the Holy Father added: “To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests himself, in his many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of his body and his blood.”<sup>47</sup>

The Second Vatican Council recalled our ancient tradition that Christ is present in the Eucharist in several ways:

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” but especially under the Eucharistic elements. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).<sup>48</sup>

This passage distinguishes four modes of Christ’s presence: in the assembly, in the presider, in the word and under the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. Each of these forms of Christ’s presence can only be properly understood in light of the other forms. Those who minister to the community in liturgical roles should be attentive to all the ways that Christ is present.

Each of these modes of Christ’s presence requires a response from us. To recognize and respond to Christ’s presence is one way of describing the reverence that should be the hallmark of our worship. If we truly believe that Christ is with us, then reverence is the only appropriate response.

#### *Christ in the Assembly*

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (18:20). The first way that Christ reveals his presence at Mass, therefore, is in the very gathering of the assembly. When two or more believers come together for worship, Christ is already present in their midst.

Recognizing Christ in one another as we gather may seem like a new idea to many Catholics. In past generations, we were taught to ignore one another at church in order to focus solely on God or on Christ’s presence in the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle. Yet the recognition of Christ in one another has been part of the Church’s tradition since its earliest days. The council called us to recover that overlooked part of our tradition.

We believe that those who are baptized receive the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit makes Christ present within us. Together we form the body of Christ, so when we assemble as one body for worship, that presence is intensified as the body of Christ becomes visibly united. As we gather, Christ reveals his presence to us in one another.

When St. Teresa of Kolkata was asked how she found the strength to keep ministering to dying beggars in the streets of Calcutta, she said simply that she saw in them the face of Christ. This is the challenge for each of us—to recognize the face of Christ in our brothers and sisters.

Reverence for Christ revealing himself in our gathering means recognizing Christ in one another and responding to his presence. That’s the fundamental basis for hospitality at worship. Rather than ignoring each

other, we need to learn to recognize Christ in one another and welcome him as we welcome each other to the assembly. This is far more than simply being friendly, for it is the first way we encounter Christ among us.

### ***Christ in the Presider***

When the celebration actually begins, Christ reveals his presence among us through the priest or bishop who presides at the liturgy. The presider leads the assembly in worship, but it is really Christ himself who is the true leader of our worship. Even though the presider is a part of the assembly, we distinguish this as a separate mode of Christ's presence because of this leadership role.

Reverence for Christ in the presider requires us to acknowledge Christ and respond to his presence by entering into the celebration. Christ invites us to share in his act of worship of the Father and to take part in his sacrifice. Refusing to respond or sing or engage in the actions of the liturgy is a rejection of Christ's invitation, an act of irreverence. We are called to respond fully, both internally and externally, embracing the full, conscious, active participation that the council called the primary aim of the liturgical renewal.

### ***Christ in the Word***

When the word of God is proclaimed in our midst, the council reminded us, it is Christ himself who speaks to us. Christ is truly present in the word, so the Church has always shown reverence for the word. The Introduction to the Lectionary says that the Church "has honored the word of God and the Eucharistic mystery with the same reverence" (# 10), though many Catholics were not taught that reverence for the word very well in recent generations.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have become more familiar with the Bible and more aware of the importance of God's word for shaping our daily lives. It is less clear, however, how many really recognize Christ's presence in the word proclaimed, how many realize that it is Christ himself who is speaking to them when the lector or deacon or presider proclaims the readings.

If we do recognize that Christ is speaking to us, basic respect requires that we pay attention, looking at the speaker and listening attentively with open ears and open hearts. That is the way we express reverence for this form of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

### ***Christ Present Under the Form of Bread and Wine***

The final form of Christ's presence that we encounter in the Mass is the bread and wine transformed into his body and blood. We are accustomed to calling this the "real presence" of Christ, but it is important to recognize that all the forms of Christ's presence are real. Each is different from the others and each offers a unique way to encounter the Lord.

Catholic tradition insists that the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of the Lord. That is a key element of our faith. That same tradition goes a step further, however, to insist that the reason for this change is to change those who participate in the act of worship into the body of Christ.

This relationship between the sacramental body of Christ and the ecclesial body of Christ is central to a proper understanding of the Eucharist. Theologians both ancient and modern remind us of this essential link. St. Paul put it rather bluntly in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (11:29). When we share in the body and blood of the Lord in communion, we must also remember that Christ is present in the assembly who shares this holy meal.

St. Augustine (late fourth to early fifth century) once chastised his people for trying to decapitate Christ. They could not, he insisted, have the head of the body (Christ) without the rest of the body (the Church). Augustine also urged the newly baptized to remember that they are the body of Christ. "It is your own mystery that is placed on the altar," he taught them. "You reply 'Amen' to that which you are, and by replying you consent. For you hear 'The Body of Christ' and you reply 'Amen' . . . Be what you see, and receive what you are."<sup>49</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) clearly taught that the bread and wine become the body and blood of the Lord, but he did not see this as the purpose of the Eucharist. The real goal of the sacrament and its ultimate meaning, he taught, is the unity of the Church. Another way to put this is to say that Christ did not give us the Eucharist to transform bread and wine into his body and blood. It does that, of course, but Christ gave us this sacrament to transform us into his body. That is the goal of the Eucharist and the meaning of Communion. As St. John Chrysostom put it: "What is this bread? The body of Christ. What becomes of those who participate in this bread? The body of Christ."

In more recent times, Pope John Paul II insisted in his apostolic letter, *Dies Domini - The Day of the Lord*: "It is also important to be ever mindful that communion with Christ is deeply tied to communion with our brothers and sisters. The Sunday Eucharistic gathering is an experience of brotherhood, which the celebration should demonstrate clearly..."

Reverence for Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements, then, requires recognizing and responding to him in both the Eucharistic bread and wine and in all those who share in this sacred meal. We respond by sharing the bread and cup and by expressing our unity by taking part in the communion procession and singing the communion song. These are all acts of reverence for Christ's presence.

Thus this fourth mode of Christ's presence brings us full circle, back to his presence in the community of faith. Each of these modes of his presence supports the others, and together they offer us rich opportunities to encounter the Lord, draw closer to him and be transformed by the experience.

