

“DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”

A Class on the Mass Part 2: The Real Presence

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we experience the Real Presence of Jesus in many and varied ways. In the GIRM we read:

At Mass - that is, the Lord's Supper - the people of God is called together, with a priest presiding and acting in the person of Christ, to celebrate the memorial of the Lord, the Eucharistic Sacrifice. For this reason Christ's promise applies in an outstanding way to such a local gathering of the holy Church: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." (Mt 18:20). For in the celebration of Mass, in which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated, Christ is really present in the very liturgical assembly gathered in his name, in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and continuously under the Eucharistic species." (GIRM #27, p. 17)

Although we usually think and speak of the Real Presence as bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ during Mass, we also experience the Presence of our Lord in the altar, the priest, the congregation, and the Scriptures as well. Each of these Presences, equal in their importance, demand a different response on our part, beginning with an act of faith followed by an appropriate behavior.

Our first encounter with the Lord as we enter the Church is the **altar**. During Mass all attention is placed on the altar where the Sacrificial Meal will take place. The altar symbolizes Jesus Christ and ought to be held in great respect. For this reason the priest reverences the altar by first bowing to it and then kissing it. If there is a tabernacle present in the church the priest will genuflect or bow to it and then turns his attention to the altar. When we enter the church after we sign ourselves with the holy water, reminding us of our baptismal dignity, we genuflect to the tabernacle but then direct all our attention to the altar. If we have difficulty genuflecting we can bow toward the tabernacle. We then concentrate all our attention on the altar.

The **priest** who stands in the person of Jesus Christ takes the place of the Lord at the table and leads us in the celebration of the Mass. In this sense he "presides" but we all "celebrate" the Mass together. This is why he is more appropriately called the "Presider" rather than the "Celebrant" of the Mass. It is at this time at the altar that the priest is most fully "priest" and why, despite all his other functions in a parish, he was ordained. It is for this reason that we show him respect. The priest, of course, has the responsibility to preside well at the Mass in order to enhance the celebration and assist the congregation in its prayer.

Something we seldom think about is the Real Presence of Jesus in us, the **congregation**. We are more than a crowd or an audience but rather an assembly, a gathering of believers, who have been called by the Lord to worship in His Presence. If we were to be asked when the Mass begins we would have to say in the parking lot of the church! When the first two Catholics greet one another the Mass has begun. Jesus taught that when two or three are gathered in His name He is there present. There are more than two or three present for Mass each weekend. When we recognize this Presence of the Lord we begin to see each other in a new way which demands our attention and respect. We are called to be aware of the people around us who believe as we do and have gathered with us to worship our God. After all, our congregation is a community, that is

a “common unity” in Jesus Christ. Our awareness of one another means that we see Jesus in one another and that we are called to show hospitality. We are called to make others feel welcomed, especially the stranger, and to be attentive to the needs of others around us. Our presence is important to the community because it is not complete if we are missing and through our actions we assist others in their worship.

At each weekend Mass we hear three readings from **Scripture**: The first comes from the Old Testament, the second from the New Testament, usually the letters of St. Paul, and the third reading from one of the Gospels. It is during this part of the Mass called the Liturgy of the Word that we encounter the Real Presence of Jesus as the Word of God. In the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel we hear Jesus described as the “Word” (John 1:1-5) sometimes called the greatest “Word” ever proclaimed by God the Father. When we hear the Scriptures, the Word of God, we encounter a Real Presence of the Lord. The Hebrews had a term “dabar” meaning word which at the same time also meant an action. As we hear in Genesis when God spoke something came into being: “Let there be light and there was light”. When we hear God speak, His word becomes a reality that is to touch our hearts and take effect in our lives. Our response to this reality, this Real Presence of Jesus, is to listen attentively and be open to what we hear and try to apply it to our lives. The priest or deacon in his homily help us to apply this revelation of God to our lives.

Of course, when we hear the term the “Real Presence” we usually think of what happens during the Liturgy of the Eucharist at the time of the Consecration. The priest using the words that Jesus used at the Last Supper, “This is my Body.....This is My Blood” consecrates bread and wine which now becomes the Body and the Blood of Christ. Although it feels, tastes, and looks like bread and wine, our faith tells us that it is no longer bread and wine. We are given the opportunity to reaffirm our faith in this Mystery when the priest elevates the Host and the Chalice and we can gaze upon it and make an act of belief. During the Communion Rite we will have the privilege to receive this very Body and Blood of Christ into our body.

The final Real Presence takes place when we leave the church. We cannot leave Jesus in the church! We through our words and actions are asked to make Jesus really present in our world. As the Body of Christ we become His visible presence spreading His message of love to others.

Reflection Questions:

1. Which of the Presences of Jesus do you have difficulty experiencing during the Mass? Why?
2. How well do you know the people who celebrate with you during Mass?
3. During the Liturgy of the Word do the Scripture readings and the homily have any impact on your life?
4. Does your experience at Mass influence your life daily?