

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. The presence of Christ among us #4

One of the memories that “pre-Vatican II” Catholics have of the Mass as it was then celebrated was the anticipation of the sound of bells or chimes that were sounded at the time of the consecration. We knew immediately that we could look up at that time and adore the presence of Christ in the Host and Precious Blood as they were being held aloft by the priest (sometimes for a lengthy space of time). For most Catholic folks, this was the prime moment in the Mass, the time when Catholics could be one with their Lord. To be distracted or to miss the sound of the bell was tantamount to “missing Mass.” It never occurred to us then (how could it?) that there might be other ways that Christ was present when we gathered for liturgy.

When the bishops met for the Second Vatican Council, one of the key principles they put forth regarding the liturgy is that Christ is present in the liturgy in unique ways:

“. . . in the person of his minister, ‘the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,’ and most of all in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody 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 church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them’ (Matthew 18:20).” (From The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #7)

In the recently published *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), the directions which guide priests and other liturgical ministers in celebrating the Mass, the first presence of Christ mentioned is that in the assembled people of God. (#27)

Christ is present when the assembly is gathered in his name. This is precisely what Christ promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Therefore each time we come together to celebrate the liturgy, singing and praying, Christ is present in and with us.

The second way in which Christ is with us in the liturgy is in the person of the minister. Christ is present to us in the priest who is called the presider or priest-celebrant of the liturgical assembly. He leads the community in prayer and helps us to understand the

words and actions of the liturgy. When he does so, he also acts in the person of Christ, on our behalf. He does this especially by the way he acts and speaks with dignity, reverence and humility so that the living presence of Christ is conveyed in and through him.

The third form of Christ's four-fold presence to us in any liturgy we celebrate is in the Word of God. No matter whether we participate in a Mass, the other sacraments, or the Liturgy of the Hours, we always hear the Word of God proclaimed in Scripture. Whether that reading is from the Old or New Testament, Christ is present in the Word. In fact, at the beginning of John's Gospel, we hear that Christ **is** the Word of God. He is God speaking to us. And so each time we hear God's Word from the Law, a prophet, a psalm, a gospel, a letter, or any other Scripture passage, Christ is there for us and with us.

The fourth way Christ is present to us in the liturgy is in what the Church calls the "Eucharistic species." This is the preeminent presence of Christ. Christ is especially present in the bread and wine that become the Body and Blood of Christ. What looks like bread and wine has truly become Christ's Body and Blood by the "taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing" of the presider and the assembly gathered and by the grace of God. Was it not in the "breaking of the bread" that the disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus present with them?

What this should mean to Catholics gathered for Mass, therefore, is that they need not wait for bells to ring at the consecration to realize that Christ is present. Indeed, the very moment we gather with one another in the house of

the church, Christ is already present. When we hear and respond to God's Word, when the presider leads us and invites to pray together, Christ becomes more and more visible and discernible to us. All this takes us back again to the importance of signs and symbols. As human beings in our search of God, we need all the help we can get!