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# Assembly Required: Christ's Presence in the Pews

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# Assembly Required

## *Christ's Presence in the Pews*

William L. Portier

**P**icture a choir-loft view of a church full of Catholics assembled for the Eucharist. It's a solemn feast, Easter perhaps. The presiding priest has just incensed the gifts and the altar, and has himself been properly revered in turn by the server. The server, who probably doesn't do this very often, manages to survive holding the thurible open so the priest can put in more incense, and now wobbles toward the congregation like one of those 1970s toy Weebles. Rare is the server who achieves oneness with the thurible. Most know it as an alien, near infernal smoking thing that wants to take flight on its own, and this is what it seems like as the server clanks it against the chain and wafts it three times over the congregation. In random clumps the congregants begin to straggle to their feet. From the choir loft they look more like a choppy sea than a wave. The server bows. The people are standing now. Most bow in return and watch the server wobble back into the sanctuary.

As a performance it is far from perfect. Important feasts don't happen every week, and only the pure would expect us all to get it right. In the hierarchical scheme of things, this reverencing of the congregation with incense doesn't seem that important—it is left to the server, after all, rather than the priest or the deacon. Nevertheless, it remains a precious symbolic transaction, enacting with more or less ritual grace the Catholic teaching that Christ—in addition to his presence in the Eucharist, in the Word proclaimed, and in the person of the priest—is also present in the Eucharistic assembly itself. The server's herky-jerky attempt to embody this truth in liturgical rite by reverencing the congregation with incense is both a maddeningly and a consolingly familiar microcosm of Catholicism itself, a religion mediated in history by incarnate souls who combine love and fear, faith and doubt, in ways that are sometimes heroic but more often, well, Weeble-wobbly.

Once, in another lifetime, I taught high-school religion. As anyone who has faced a classroom of teenagers knows, the experience can be withering. "Why should I go to Mass? I don't get anything out of it." "Why can't I just pray at

home?" "I can be a good Christian without going to church." "People who go to church are hypocrites anyway." "You just do the same thing over and over every week. It's so *boring!*" For my part, as I get older, I find myself looking forward more and more to going to church. It is less of a discipline, more of a joy. But it's hard to communicate that to younger people who honestly don't think they "get anything" out of the experience. Churchgoing is a cumulative experience, something that forms you. If you don't do it, you get formed without it, formed in another way. There might be times when you have to do it in trust—as a discipline, a way of being taught.

When I attempt to articulate what I "get out of" going to church, I find myself increasingly emphasizing the real presence of Christ in the assembly. It has been almost fifty years since Vatican II, so it is well to recall what the council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* said in 1963 about that presence. It taught that, in order to accomplish the work of salvation for which the Father sent him, Christ is always present in the church, especially in the church's liturgical celebrations.

He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the presence of his minister, "the same one now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the Cross," [citing Trent on the Mass] but especially under the Eucharistic species. 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, finally, when the church prays and sings, for he promised: "Whenever two or three are gathered together for my sake, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

What's hard to convey to young people is the idea of an engagement beyond mere volition, and that our relationship to church is not simply about wanting (or not wanting) to go. The word *assembly* is important here. Our word *church* translates the idea of Israel as God's assembly, the people God calls together. An assembly in this sense is the opposite of a voluntary association. Matthew 18:20 significantly uses the passive voice, "whenever two or three are gathered," recognizing that although in the daily psychological sense we choose to go to church on Sunday, it is God who gathers us. New Testament writers use this word *assembly* to refer to

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Mass on the Feast of the Assumption at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

what they also call Christ's "body," what we call the church. The church assembled by God for worship is in a very real sense the *verum corpus*, the true body of Christ.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy refers to Christ's presence "especially under the Eucharistic species," the appearances of bread and wine. We believe that in the Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Christ—the *verum corpus* in another form—and since at least the thirteenth century, we have used the word *transubstantiation* to refer to this change. Something like transubstantiation happens in a less concentrated and intense way to the assembly: a collection of people and words and movements that would otherwise appear quite ordinary becomes extraordinary. In the church gathered for worship, it is Christ who proclaims the word and prays the eucharistic prayer. According to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, it is also Christ who responds in prayer; it is Christ who sings. The assembly is, in a real sense, the body of Christ, the *verum corpus*. In the Eucharistic assembly Christ has many voices, many hands, many faces.

This is clear in the Prayer Over the Gifts that the priest says during Lent. The prayers alternate between asking for the transformation of the gifts and the transformation of us. "Lord, make us worthy to bring you these gifts. May this sacrifice help to change our lives."

And so on solemn feasts, we reverence with incense not only the priestly minister, the Scriptures, and the altar upon which the "Eucharistic species" rests, but also, however clumsily, we waft incense over the congregation, reverencing the many faces of Christ in the eucharistic assembly.

Emphasizing the real presence of Christ in the assembly doesn't mean de-emphasizing Christ's real presence in either the word proclaimed or in the Eucharist. We should pay attention to the readings, the homily, and the Eucharistic Prayer, since Christ really addresses us and prays in those words. And one can draw close to Christ in a personal way at Holy Communion. Indeed, when I was younger, I would

have thought these were the main ways to experience fully the presence of Christ at Mass. But in the forty-some years I have been going to Mass in the renewed rite of the Second Vatican Council, Christ's presence in the assembly has come more fully into view.

If taken seriously, this idea that Christ is truly present among us in the assembly could expand your vision in striking ways, help you see with new eyes. It means that when you walk up the steps and into the church and someone greets you at the door, you might catch a glimpse of the face of Christ—and he or she might, too. The lector might be your neighbor or your spouse, but at Mass his or her voice is also God's. The priest who prays over our gifts speaks the very words of Christ, and yet he remains someone we know, someone like us. This would be unthinkable if it were not really Christ who baptizes and offers the sacrifice. These are scary and humbling thoughts, not to be taken lightly.

If Christ is truly present and if his sacrifice is truly re-presented, then one of the most important things we can understand about liturgy is that it changes time. At Mass the past and the future that are somehow already built into the present become sacramentally perceptible. Allow me a sports fan's analogy. Writing in *Sports Illustrated*, the incomparable Joe Posnanski expostulated on the "deep, mystifying, surreal meaning of baseball." Baseball, says Posnanski, "is a game out of time" in which history is "a living breathing character." In baseball, "past and present click together." Anyone who understands baseball as Posnanski exquisitely describes it has an instant *praeparatio evangelica* for the Mass.

The body of Christ, the church, is a great church. It spreads over all time. On Sunday mornings, past and present "click together" in our churches. At Mass we are united in a communion of prayer and charity with all the living and dead throughout history who have ever gone to Mass. Not only does the Eucharist make the past present, it also makes present in an anticipatory way the heavenly banquet. The "Holy, Holy" reminds us that this rite "out of time" places



## ASH WEDNESDAY

I boiled my life down  
to the purest extract  
and watched it dry  
and flake away

—Timothy P. Schilling

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us before the throne of God with the angels and all those who have gone before us. In the liturgy, heaven's worshiping cloud of witnesses surrounds us. Church architecture once gave a vivid sense of this and in some places still does. You can look up and around to see the angels and the saints surrounding you.

These notions are not as crazy as they might appear. As Joe Posnanski knows, memory is powerful. The church is like a great field of dreams. It is not Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 White Sox who come out of the corn and into the light, however, but Peter and Paul, Martha and Mary, Perpetua and Felicity, Francis and Dominic, Anthony of Padua, Elizabeth Ann Seton, and all the holy men and women whose prayers we ask for in John Becker's haunting setting of the Litany of the Saints. This is not exactly Mass, but it is being part of a history and knowing how to live there. The country singer Lyle Lovett has a song, "The Family Reserve," that could be about the Communion of Saints. The verses invoke the names of dead family members and friends, names like Great Uncle Julius and Aunt Annie Mueller and Mary and Granddaddy Paul. "I feel them watching, and I see them laughing, and I hear them singing along," Lovett sings. "And we're all gonna be here forever."

I like to think that Posnanski and Lovett, along with William Kennedy at the beginning of *Ironweed*, Michael Malone at the end of *Foolscape*, and many other artists, are all channeling, St. Justin-style, the Logos that writes what Pope Benedict has called creation's "grammar." They all manage to conjure up something like my sense of the dead who are present at Mass in the Communion of Saints. But you don't have to look up to be surrounded by the saints. You can also look around you and see the many faces of Christ in the assembly. There are screaming babies. There are those who have been here long enough to see their babies grow

up and come to church with them—and sometimes refuse to come. There are the people you work with, neighbors, students, teachers, the plumber, the doctor, people who work in the store, nurses who took care of you in the hospital, the babysitter who watched your kids. We're all here in our ordinariness, still looking quite like ourselves. But in this holy, out-of-time gathering, we are also the *verum corpus*.

This is especially clear at particular liturgical moments. One of my favorite parts of Sunday Mass is the Creed. Christian assemblies have been professing this creed in various languages since the fourth century. I can't help thinking of the cast of characters from the Council of Nicaea in 325. There's Hosius and Eusebius, Constantine, and Arius, the unfortunate priest who occasioned the controversy the Creed was meant to settle. But most moving to me is the sound of all the people, voices welling up strongly and steadily, joining with all those who have ever said the Creed and who will ever say it, lifting and carrying one another as the tradition embodied and rearticulated in time. The Sign of Peace is another place in the order of Mass where the body of Christ shines through the assembly and where we explicitly advert to his presence among us. And the Communion procession makes the *verum corpus* in the assembly poignantly visible—a company of ill-assorted Weebles, all on the way to be fed by Jesus who ate with sinners and gave bread to the multitudes.

I look on the many faces of Christ in the assembly. Often I see them from the choir loft as they walk back from Communion. The mothers and fathers remind me of when I was young. I know their hopes and fears for their children. I know how they feel when their babies scream. Even as they cry, those babies ensure that, according to Christ's promise, his body will continue on earth when we are gone. But is all this too much? Can it really be true, that we are the very body of Christ?

Many feel obliged to walk away from such a saying. Young cynics have reason to smell hypocrisy. After all, who among us even comes close to being good enough to be the face of Christ, to speak his words? The answer is obvious—no one does. And yet, because of Jesus' command and his promise, we continue. To the young I can only say this: Do this for a long time and it will change the way you see. The familiar words you have heard and spoken hundreds of times, thousands of times, will no longer be boring. They will be like warm and familiar waters, and your spirit will float restfully in them. Over a lifetime, the words and gestures of the Mass will become heavy with the memory of all the people you've said and done them with. They will begin to speak to you of the living and the dead. You will see the Body of Christ.

When I was a young cynic, deep in my existential fouled-up period, I thought that old people went to church because they had nothing better to do and knew they would die soon. Now I know better. We go to taste the sweetness of the Lord. ■