

UNDERSTANDING
GOD'S REAL
PRESENCE



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For most of us, God’s real presence is indeed a mystery, in the theological sense that describes a reality that is beyond our full explanation, but not beyond our experience. So with God’s real presence in ourselves through grace, in our lives through the action of the Holy Spirit, and through the risen Christ in the eucharistic ritual, in particular in the bread and wine that are transformed through God’s power into his body and blood. We believe that Christ is present, but we do not have any sense experience to confirm our belief because the risen Christ not always directly seen or heard or even “felt.” This belief in God’s real presence—God’s choice to be with us and save us—is the foundation of our human existence, the message of the Bible and the content of our most fundamental Christian beliefs like the Trinity and the Incarnation. So let us explore the meaning of our belief in God’s real presence by understanding its scriptural foundation, its doctrinal explanation and its relation to the eucharist that we celebrate each week.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRESENCE?

In its most general sense, presence means being with another. We all experience presence in several familiar ways. It might be **local**, when we are in the same physical place as another. It can also be **temporal**, when we are with another at the same time. Local and temporal presence usually go together, but sometimes we can be temporally present to another without being physically with them, for example when talking over the phone or via the internet. A third kind of presence might be called **personal**—how we experience “being with” another person—even when that person is not physically with us but is with us through our memory, imagination or emotions.

Personal presence goes beyond sense perception. When someone lives far away from us or when a loved one dies, for example, that person can continue to be present with us when we remember the person, recall their words to us, or let the feeling of their presence affect us. Personal presence, because it goes beyond what the senses provide, relies on an inner or spiritual connection and so is most like what we experience in relation to God. This kind of personal connection allows us to have a spiritual experience of God’s presence—a presence that goes beyond anything our physical senses can detect.

HOW IS GOD PRESENT TO US?

God is present to us through both general and particular forms of revelation. We believe that God is present “everywhere” and “always” as the creator and sustainer of our existence. We also believe that God chooses to reveal God’s own reality to us through particular created realities, most importantly, through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Theologian Richard McBrien in his book *Catholicism* explains that “Because God is totally other than we are, because God is totally of the spiritual order, because God, therefore, is not visible to our bodily senses, our experience of God is always *mediated*. We experience the reality of God through our experience of created things, or particular persons, or particular events, or through a psychic sense of divine presence (mysticism). Consequently, every contact with God is mysterious, or sacramental. The *hidden* God completely permeates a visible reality. In grasping that visible reality we grasp the hidden God.”

OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD’S PRESENCE

Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI can be our guide here. In his encyclical *On Christian Love* (2005), he explains that while it is true that “no one has ever seen God as God is, yet God is not totally invisible to us; God does not remain completely inaccessible. God has become visible in Jesus. God is also visible in a number of ways.

In the love story recounted by the Bible, God comes towards us and seeks to win our hearts.”

The religion of the Bible is always dominated by the experience, the memory or the hope of the divine presence. We know about God’s presence with us through the biblical story of salvation—God’s efforts to be with us so that the relationship between God and ourselves that was established at creation, and then broken down through sin, could be restored. Through this story, we learn of God’s desire for a covenant community in which all who believe and dedicate themselves to God and to God’s ways can live as God wanted from the beginning.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE GOD’S PRESENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The Bible reveals that God chooses to be with us so that we can be in the right relationship with God. The Old Testament describes several ways that God freely chooses to be present with us (local/temporal/personal) through something that is “sense perceptible” so we can experience it. For example, God appears to persons in dreams, to Moses in the burning bush, to the exodus community in the pillar of fire and cloud, to the worshippers in the temple, to the prophets in God’s word and to the people in social and personal situations.

WHAT FORMS DOES GOD'S PRESENCE TAKE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

In the New Testament, the primary revelation of God's presence is in Jesus himself. He is the incarnation of



God's very being in human form and, as such, is the model for what God invites us all to become. Jesus brings about through his death and resurrection the final reconciliation between

God and humanity. At the Last Supper, he promised to be with us in the bread and wine as our food and drink when we remember him and his death and resurrection (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

HOW DOES GOD'S PRESENCE CONTINUE AFTER THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS?

Paul, whose letters are the oldest writings in the New Testament, identifies several ways that Christ continues to be present after his resurrection:

- in the community, which is identified as the new earthly body of Christ and so the place where Jesus continues to reveal God's work of salvation
- in individual Christians, who through grace (God's life in us) and through the gifts of Holy Spirit (God's power at work in us) continue Jesus' saving mission

- in the eucharistic meal in which the community experiences the unique presence of Jesus who promised to be with us as the bread and wine when we do this action in his memory.

Each Gospel also shares the belief in the risen Christ's continuing presence to the community of disciples. Only Luke has the Ascension of the Risen Christ to heaven (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-11). The other Gospels describe Jesus' continuing presence in the community here on earth:

- Matthew: the risen Christ promises to be with the disciples in their mission (28:16-20)
- Mark: angels in the tomb tell the disciples that they will meet Christ in Galilee as he promised (16:7)
- Luke: Christ will be with us hidden in the scriptural word, the eucharist and in other persons who share our journey (24:13-35)
- John: Jesus will send the Holy Spirit who will continue the presence and work of the absent Jesus (16:5-11).

HOW DO THE SACRAMENTS REVEAL GOD'S PRESENCE?

The sacraments are ritual celebrations through which we actually experience the power of God present with us. Through the sacramental words and actions, God acting in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit actually brings about what the signs represent. The sacraments are not only signs of our salvation but

bring about the realities they symbolize. As Pope St. Leo the Great so perceptively noted: “Our redeemer’s presence has passed into the sacraments.” St. Hilary of Poitiers also explains that “When Jesus became human, he actually clothed himself in our flesh, uniting it to himself for ever. In the sacrament of his body, he actually gives us his own flesh, which he has united to his divinity.”

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND CHRIST’S REAL PRESENCE IN THE SACRAMENT OF THE EUCHARIST?

Fr. Kenan B. Osborne explains that “Today, the Church has asked us to understand this eucharistic presence of Jesus in a richer way than ever before. Jesus is present in the gathering of the community, in the proclamation of the word, and in the banquet of bread and wine. Beyond this we must find the Lord not only in the table of the eucharist, but in the table of the world



around us. If we do not see Jesus in this table of the world, we will really not find Jesus in the table of the eucharist; and if we do indeed find Jesus in the table of the eucharist, we should leave

the eucharistic celebration with eyes of faith that allow us to find Jesus throughout the table of the world” (*Sacramental Theology*, p. 133).

CAN YOU EXPLAIN HOW GOD IS PRESENT WITH US IN THE EUCHARIST?

No. Explaining how God is present to us is impossible for it is a theological mystery, in the strict sense. The idea of mystery as it is used by theologians identifies a reality that we affirm through faith to be true, but which we cannot adequately explain no matter how hard our minds work at it. The Christian mysteries of faith identify such realities as the Trinity (one divine reality that is at once three distinct persons), the Incarnation (Jesus who is truly both divine and human) and Jesus' real presence with us as the eucharistic bread and wine.



BUT DON'T WE HAVE DOCTRINES THAT EXPLAIN THESE MYSTERIES?

Not really. Doctrinal explanations usually arise in response to problems. When things start going wrong, the Church's teachers need to "define" (Latin, to set the limits) what we believe and offer the best help to understand it. Our clue that doctrines are supposed to guide what we say about the mysteries of faith is found most clearly in the practical decrees of the Councils that point to what are erroneous explanations and always begin, "If anyone says that..., let that one be condemned."

DOCTRINES HELP UNDERSTAND OUR EXPERIENCE

The basis of our faith is the mystery itself. Doctrines do not really explain these mysteries—nothing can really explain them completely—but doctrines offer theological guidelines for understanding and talking about these unique mysteries of faith. With regard to the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, as Pope Pius XII wrote, “The faith of the Church is this: That one and identical is the Word of God and the Son of Mary who suffered on the Cross, who is present in the eucharist, and who rules in heaven.” This is what we believe. Doctrine about the real presence concerns how best to think and talk about this mystery.

WHY DO WE CALL THIS EUCHARISTIC PRESENCE “REAL”?

The word *real* comes from a Latin word, *res, realis*, which means *thing*. So to identify this presence as real, “thinglike,” is meant to convey the sense that it is the presence of one “thing” to another, not just a fleeting change but an enduring reality, like the thing rather than its changing features.

Pope Paul VI explained the Church’s use of the term this way. “This presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is

a substantial presence by which Christ, divine and human, makes himself wholly and entirely present” (*Mystery of Faith*, 1965).

WHAT IS A “SUBSTANTIAL” PRESENCE?

To identify this as a “substantial” presence adopts the substance/accidents terminology used by Medieval Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) using the terms coined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC). The idea of a thing being made up of substance and accidents rests on our everyday experience. **Substance** (Latin, “standing under”) talks about the basic underlying reality shared by many individuals. **Accidents** (Latin, “clinging or hanging on to”) describe the changeable features noticed by our senses that vary among the individuals.



As the term implies, the substance is what “stands under” all of the accidents. The substance identifies what we call the thing—the dog, cat, house, person, car. The accidents refer to characteristics of the thing such as color, weight, shape, etc. So even though many accidental characteristics might change—I put on or lose weight, lose a tooth, dye my hair, get a tattoo, replace a hip joint—my substance continues and I remain myself.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO THE DOCTRINE OF TRANSUBSTANTIATION?

In response to several theological controversies sparked by the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of transubstantiation was officially adopted by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as an attempt to guide our thinking about the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements of bread and wine. The doctrine of transubstantiation tells us that to understand the difference between the bread and wine before the eucharistic prayer at Mass and after it, the change can best be described as a change of substance not of accidental features.

SO WHAT DOES A CHANGE OF SUBSTANCE MEAN?

Transubstantiation tells us that what happens with the bread and wine through the act of consecration is a change in their substance brought about by the action of God's Holy Spirit. After the consecration, the bread and wine are no longer the same things (substances) they were before. Before the consecration, their substance was that of bread and wine, after it their substance is the person of Jesus Christ. As St. Augustine said, "The bread that you see on the altar is the body of Christ as soon as it is sanctified by God's word. The chalice, or better what is contained in the chalice, is the blood of Christ as soon as it is sanctified by God's word."

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ACCIDENTS OF THE BREAD AND WINE?

The change in the substance does not affect the accidents at all. After the consecration, the shape, color, taste—everything except the substance—remains exactly the same. There is no way by analyzing the bread and wine, for example though chemistry or atomic analysis, to discover any difference. So we cannot just “take a good look” at the consecrated bread and wine and conclude that they have undergone a change of substance.

Only our “eyes of faith” can perceive the change. As St. Francis of Assisi reminds us, “Just as Christ appeared before the holy apostles in true flesh, so now he has us see him in the sacred bread. Looking at him with the eyes of their flesh, they saw only his flesh, but regarding him with the eyes of the spirit, they believed that he was God. In like manner, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, let us see and believe firmly that it is his most holy body and blood, true and living.”

HOW LONG DOES THE CHANGE IN SUBSTANCE LAST?

Since the change in substance is a change in the thing itself, it lasts until it is no more. For us, the substantial change in the bread and wine remains until these are changed into our substance as happens to all food

through digestion. This also helps to explain the reverence for the bread that extends beyond the actual Mass.

In the early Church as today, the eucharistic bread is taken to those in the community who could not be part of the Sunday eucharist, especially those who were ill or in danger of death. The eucharistic bread is also reserved in a special location in our churches (the tabernacle) and brought forth for reverent adoration. The ceremony called “Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament” allows us to reverence Christ present with us and to be blessed with the eucharistic bread.

WHAT HAPPENS TO US WHEN WE RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?

Just as we nourish our bodies by eating, so we nourish our spiritual lives by contact with God’s presence in the eucharistic bread and wine. Through Holy



Communion, we become what we eat—the body of Christ. The divine reality works from within us—this is what grace is all about—God’s divine life present in us is at work transforming us from within. As digestion transforms the bread and wine into ourselves, so on the spiritual level we are being transformed into the divine through contact with God’s holy reality.

HOW DOES THE REAL PRESENCE MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR LIVES?

We believe that God's real presence continues today in our lives and in the Church, especially in the sacraments. Fr. Kenan Osborne, whom we quoted earlier, outlines how our appreciation of Christ's real presence also becomes the foundation of our spirituality. "Eucharist speaks to us about the presence of Jesus. Indeed, the real presence of Jesus is



the key to eucharistic theology. It is also the key to eucharistic spirituality. Again, we do not 'see' Jesus as present; we must believe that Jesus is present in the eucharistic meal. Every eucharist, then, if celebrated correctly, deepens our faith in the Lord's presence" (*Sacramental Theology*, p. 133).

In closing, let us be encouraged by the words of Pope Benedict XVI: "God encounters us ever anew, in the men and women who reflect God's presence, in God's word, in the sacraments, and especially in the eucharist. In the Church's liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive God's presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives" (*On Christian Love*).

So as we take Christ into our mouths and into our hearts, let us become more and more like Christ himself. In this way we will more faithfully imitate his love and our lives will radiate with his compassion for others and his concern for justice. As Teresa of Avila recognized, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which to look at Christ’s compassion to the world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.”

