



Presence

As you may (or may not) know, we are currently in the second year of the National Eucharistic Revival, a three-year initiative launched by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to reinvigorate Catholics' engagement with the Mass and, more specifically, to bring them back to a lived experience of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. To express the need for this in numbers: weekly attendance at Mass is down to 17% in the United States and only about 30% of American Catholics believe in the Real Presence.

There are number of reasons for these sad and shocking statistics. Mass attendance had already been in a steady decline when the pandemic and subsequent lockdown dealt it a severe blow from which it is has yet to recover. And several generations of poor catechesis have rendered many adult Catholics uninformed and uninspired. Before we get too gloomy, though, let's remember that World Youth Day just a couple weeks ago in Lisbon drew 1.5 million pilgrims, hundreds of thousands of whom attended a record-breaking Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. God is clearly with is. Christ is truly present.

Meanwhile back in America, it seems (to me, at least) that a good deal of people's problem with the Real Presence is built into the very terms by which we think about it. The question the pollsters ask (and that we perhaps ask ourselves) is "Do you believe in the Real Presence?" This reduces a profound reality—a mystery—to a simple yes-or-no proposition. In short: an opinion. It's not entirely the pollsters' fault. Since they're asking a question about someone's faith, it seems logical to begin it with "Do you believe..." But it also ignores the complex texture of faith, the dark spots, the idiosyncrasies, the parts we haven't quite thought through. If there'd been a follow-up question asking the non-believers *why* they didn't believe in the Real Presence, the answer would most likely have been, "It's just too hard to believe" or variations thereof. Yet in the same poll, 87% of Catholics had no trouble at all believing in the Resurrection. (Don't know what quite to make of that other 13%...). How is it that someone can believe that Christ rose from the dead, but consider it a step too far to believe that he makes himself truly present in the Eucharist? What statute of limitations is being imposed on miracle—and why?

The thing about the Resurrection is that, while on the one hand it may be unimaginable to us, on the other, we each of us in our own way have an experience of resurrection that connects us on an existential level to the Paschal Mystery. This can be as dramatic as the reversal of a serious illness or recovery from addiction to more subtle resurrections such as the gradual movement from despair

to hope, from isolation to connection. The New Testament is filled with these. They're usually called miracles, but John calls them, perhaps more accurately, "signs" because they're markers—previews, if you will—pointing toward the ultimate movement from death to life: Easter morning. It's these smaller resurrections that made the Gospel message so powerful for slaves, women, Gentiles—anyone who felt something dead inside them, something unrecognized, suddenly called into life. All of us, whether we're conscious of it or not, have this little-"r" resurrection in us connecting us intimately to the big-"R" Resurrection at the center of salvation history. Maybe that 13% is just people who haven't really sat down and thought about it.

But we also have something deep down inside of us connecting us to the Real Presence, and that's a sense of presence itself, specifically the presence of others around us. Psychologists call it personal space; New Agers call it a "vibrational energy signature"; scientists call it an energy field generated by the movement of our subatomic particles. Whatever it is, it's that innate sense we have that tells us when someone is behind us, someone just entered the room, someone is on the other side of a door. We all have it to different degrees, but we all have it. This is what the "Do you believe in the Real Presence?" question gets wrong. It turns the Real Presence into an idea, into something you can agree with or not agree with. But presence isn't an idea. It's a feeling. And maybe our problems with feeling the Real Presence are just an extension of our problems with feeling the presence of each other.

There are any number of reasons for this. Every year now it seems another study comes out about the isolating effects of technology. Think of the couples or groups of friends you've seen in restaurants where no one at the table is talking, everyone's looking at their phone; think of how many parents you've seen with young children, even toddlers, too busy on their phone to pay them any attention (or who give them their phone to keep them preoccupied); think of how many times someone's bumped into you because they were busy on their phone. Technology has so internalized and customized our own presence that the presence of others can be reduced to a kind of background music. White noise. And three years of social distancing, predicated on the idea—the terror, really—that we were all potential contaminants, may have been the final nail in the personal space coffin.

The way back to the Real Presence, then, is to get back to the real presence of the people around us. A couple church-specific tips: We all have our own special place in church, that pew we always sit in, that nearness to or distance from the altar (I call it Catholic Geography). Go ahead and stay in your usual place, but adjust it somewhat. Make sure that you're sitting close enough to someone to sense their presence. (This varies for everyone. Listen to yourself: "Oh, this is too close... This is too far.") Be close enough that you can hear their responses during Mass. All through the Mass try to synchronize your responses with theirs, especially at the Our Father. Don't get ahead of them; don't fall behind. Become one voice. One body. If they're in front of you—or even in your peripheral vision—see if you can stand, sit, kneel at the same time. Give yourself over to the rhythm of their worship, of their life, of their body. Feel their presence. And feel how much you love them.

And when you go to Communion, take a moment to feel the Host in your hand. Divine Presence has a weight: a weight that's a lightness, a lightness that's a weight. ("My yoke is easy and my burden is light."). And when you consume the Host, feel how it dissolves in you, how you dissolve

in it, how you fold into the Presence of Christ, how it folds into you. Feel it. Feel the Presence.
And know that you're home, You're finally, eternally home.