

*At Mass, we meet the Lord Jesus. We meet no less than God in the priest as well as in one another, in the Word proclaimed and in bread and wine.*

We continue with our reflections of the Eucharist in this year dedicated to this study at the request of Pope John Paul II.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the first presence of the Lord that we encounter at Mass as that of the gathering people. We first meet the Lord Jesus in one another. This week I speak of a second presence of the Lord that we meet at Mass.

When we were children, many of us played the game "Follow the Leader." As we move through life, we often find it necessary or helpful to follow someone who can lead us into new knowledge or skills or who leads a team at work or on the sports field.

The liturgy has a leader, too. What leader do we follow through the various parts of our worship? One answer is that the priest or bishop is the one who leads us at Mass. A deeper answer is that the true leader of our worship is Christ himself.

The sacrifice of the Mass is Christ's sacrifice. We are invited to join him in offering praise and thanks to the Father in his act of worship. He is our leader, and we are all called to follow the leader.

Because it is really Christ who leads us through the ministry of the priest or bishop, the Church speaks of Christ's presence in the presider as the second way that Christ reveals himself to us at the Eucharist.

Those among us who have been around a few years may remember when we commonly spoke of the priest as "another Christ." Since those times, we have learned that priests have clay feet just like the rest of us. That may make it a little harder to see Christ working through the priest at Mass.

Yet it is important for us to do so. We need to remember that Christ has chosen to work through imperfect human beings. Christ lives in and works through each of us who are baptized, sinners though we are. The Church has long taught that the validity of the sacraments does not depend on the holiness of the priest. Our tradition speaks of the sacraments working "ex opere operato." This Latin phrase really means that Christ acts in the sacraments, regardless of the holiness of the priest. It reminds us that Christ is able to work through us no matter how serious our own limitations.

If Christ is the true leader of our worship, then reverence requires us to respond to his invitation to join him in worshipping the Father. To refuse to take

part is to reject his invitation, a sign of irreverence. Our participation in the Mass – singing and praying and sitting and standing and kneeling and processing – is one way that we show reverence to Christ.

Of course, Christ does not issue this invitation for his sake, but for ours. Participating in the Mass is the primary way that Christians grow in holiness. As we give ourselves to the action of the liturgy, we are drawn closer to the Lord who leads us. As we enter into the sacrifice of Christ, we learn to love as he loves.

Some days we may find it easy to enter into the liturgy; other days it may take a real effort on our part. That effort is a gift we offer the Lord, following his lead and joining in his worship. Each of us has a vital role to play in making the Mass what it should be. None of us can make that happen alone. But together, we can give God fitting thanks and praise.

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