

How is Christ present in the liturgy?

Even a quick reading of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* reveals some rather important teachings on the Church's liturgy: namely, that it is a celebration of the paschal mystery of Jesus—his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension—done for God's glory and our sanctification in the Church. Worship, then, is not something originating with us or our initiative: it is primarily Christ's saving work in which we participate. Christ has already offered perfect worship to God the Father on the Cross and continues to do so throughout time.

The work is Christ's; the liturgy is our opportunity to share in it. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* makes this point again and again: "Christ indeed always associates the Church with Himself" (n.7); "every liturgical celebration...is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church" (*ibid.*); the Liturgy of the Hours is "the very prayer which Christ Himself, together with His body, addresses to the Father" (n.84). But how is Christ present in the liturgy? It is easy enough to see how the priest or the choir director or the person next to us is present, but in what way is Christ present?

We have to accept, first of all, on the authority of the Church, that Christ is present to us—as present as the priest, the ministers, and our neighbor. We must believe, in fact, that he is as present with us at the liturgy as he was to the apostles at the Last Supper. What is different is not the *fact* of his presence but the *manner* by which he is present to us. Whereas our neighbor is present to us (and Christ to his apostles at the Last Supper) in a natural body, Christ now presents himself to us by sacramental signs in the liturgy. The Council teaches that in liturgical celebrations, "he is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister..., 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, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20)." Minister, sacrament, word, and assembly: in these ways Christ becomes really present to us—members of his Church—in his act of praise.

How do these modes of Christ's presence compare to one another? Certainly Christ is present in each mode, as present in his proclaimed word as in the sacrament of the Eucharist, for example. What differentiates these ways in which Christ is present to us is not, then, "whether" or "how much" he is present in one way rather than another, but the *mode* of his presence. It is according to the *mode* of his presence that the *Constitution* says that Christ is present "especially under the eucharistic species" (n.7). The eucharistic mode of presence is of a greater dignity than the others, for Christ's eucharistic presence is substantial and abiding. That is, after the Mass is over Christ is no longer present in the dispersed assembly, the minister, or the proclaimed word: he is, however, remaining in the form of bread. Analogously, Christ is as present to us in this world under the form of bread and wine as he is to those in heaven; nevertheless, he is "especially" present to those in heaven, for they see him face to face, whereas in this life his real presence is under the form of sacramental symbols.

By Christopher J. Carstens