



## How Do We Come to Know Jesus in the Liturgy?

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**W**hen have you most powerfully felt the presence of Jesus in your life? If that question were asked of 100 people, chances are 100 different answers would be given—all most likely valid, but all different, nonetheless. Jesus’ presence in the lives of believers is so rich that it could never be totally captured in only one “correct” answer.

Yet, on the other hand, there is a challenge presented to us as Catholics to accept that, in another sense, there is only one answer to the question of when we see the presence of Jesus most powerfully. As Catholics rooted in a rich sacramental and liturgical tradition, we cannot overlook the truth that it is in our celebration of the Eucharist that the risen Jesus is most powerfully present to us. If we don’t recognize him at Eucharist, we might legitimately question if we really recognize him anywhere else.

This truth is brought home to us in the Gospel story of the appearance of the risen Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). This story reflects the structure of the eucharistic liturgy throughout the centuries. Notice how Jesus is present in the dual aspects of word and sacrament, that is, through the telling of the story and the

sharing of the meal. At Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist are so intimately connected that they form but one act of worship. Reflecting on the elements in the Emmaus story can help us recognize the various ways the risen Jesus is present in our eucharistic celebrations today.

First, notice how Jesus joins the disciples as they are walking along together. The Lord has promised us that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he is present. Our arrival at Mass is more than just a casual coming together; rather, it is a visible sign of the unity and communion we should be sharing as we walk with the Lord all week. By the way we greet each other and make each other feel welcome, we show that we are the body of Christ.

Next, notice in the Emmaus story that the Lord is actively present to the disciples as he explains the scriptures to them. When the readings are proclaimed at Mass, we are called to be more than just passive listeners. We are called to open ourselves to the ways God is actively speaking to us, teaching us through the scriptures. It is the readings that present to us the specific challenges of the ways we are supposed to be living the Christian life, offering ourselves to God in our daily life. As the scriptures call us to conversion and to acceptance of a deeper understanding of God, they reveal to us how we still need to grow and change in order to be more Christlike. The word of God in scripture is as vital and life-giving as the Eucharist. We should hunger to hear the Sacred Scriptures as a way of meeting Jesus, and we should spend time with the Mass readings in the days before and after the liturgy.

Third, notice how the disciples in the story finally recognize the Lord when He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. This is the classical shape of the Eucharist, the fourfold action deeply rooted in our ancient tradition and still a part of our liturgy today. We recognize Jesus present as host and presider as we continue the Tradition and imitate His actions by taking (the Presentation and Preparation of the Gifts), blessing (the Eucharistic Prayer), breaking (the Fraction Rite) and giving (the Communion Procession).

Just as we take, bless, break, and give the offerings of bread and wine, which are meant to be symbols of the offering of ourselves, so too should our lives—at the celebration of the Eucharist and beyond, into every moment of every day—be offerings that are taken to God, blessed, broken, and given to others as a self-emptying gift in imitation of Jesus' offering. It is not only in the receiving of Holy Communion, but in the entire eucharistic action of eating, drinking and sharing life—both within Mass and outside Mass—that we powerfully recognize Jesus' presence.

