

## **A Muted Response to the “Real Presence”**

One objection devout Catholics can receive from other Christians is along the line of the following challenge: *“If you believe Christ is really present under the signs of bread and wine, then why don’t you act as such in your celebration?”*

The challenge within this question is the suggestion that if Christ was really and truly present in the Sacrament then we should be completely bowled over: We should experience the moment like Moses at the burning bush or the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration or St. Thomas in the Upper Room. We should take our shoes off, fall flat on our faces and utter aloud *“My Lord and my God!”*

### **Mystery vs. Theophany**

On the surface, this seems like a sharp challenge. After all, it is a very lofty claim of our faith to say that the Risen and Ascended Jesus Christ is present, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the wafer of bread and cup of wine! But, contained within the question there is a confusion between “presence-in-mystery,” and “theophany.” We do not “see” Christ’s presence in the Sacrament of Eucharist with our physical eyes but with the “eyes” of faith. In a “theophany” the veil of heaven is pulled back, so to speak, and there is a glimpse of Christ in Glory, such as is encountered by Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration wherein Jesus is described as glowing brightly.

### **The Task of Faith**

All true Christians place dominant emphasis on the role of faith in the life of the believer. *“By faith we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God, so that what is visible came into being through the invisible.”* (Hebrews 11:3) In response to St. Thomas’ profession of faith in his Resurrection, Jesus responded *“Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”* (Jn.20:29) So too, in the healing of the blind man whose eyes Jesus smears with mud produced by his saliva; it is an act of faith in the seemingly absurd to go to the pool of Siloam and wash to receive the gift of sight, (John 9). Therein too, it is not just a word of Jesus which calls for faith, but a gesture and the employment of a physical, earthly substance, (clay or mud).

### **Indwelling Presence**

The daily Bible readings of the Easter Season feature many of the long discourses of Jesus found

in the Gospel of John. Among them is the one recalled from the Last Supper wherein Jesus expounds upon his unique relationship to the Father and the Spirit. His works and his words are shared with the Father and the Spirit. The *“Father is glorified in the Son,”* and Jesus will be present in the disciples through the Advocate/Spirit of Truth, (John 14). In this long and winding Gospel passage, Jesus speaks of a new mode of his presence in the world: *“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.”* (John 14). Here there is no mention of any particular feeling or experience that will accompany Jesus’ indwelling through the Spirit-Advocate: It must be a matter of the assurance that comes from faith and will require of the disciple the effort to “abide” as a “branch” on the “vine,” (John 15)



### **Bread of Life**

This “faith” and “indwelling presence” of the Lord must surely be associated with Jesus’ insistence on “eating [his] flesh and drinking [his] blood,” (John 6). In this latter section of Chapter 6, Jesus uses the same word as is used in Chapter 15 with respect to the vine and the branches: He says, *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”* “Remaining” or “abiding” is, here, associated with the physical act of “eating” or “chewing.” As we know, from the full reading of the text, many disciples are turned off by this language, but Jesus does not back off from the physical/literal connotation but he intensifies it by shifting from the delicate word for “dining” to the animalistic word for “chewing/gnawing.”

### **Summary**

All of the above serves as one possible response to the protest that Jesus couldn’t possibly be truly present in the Eucharist because recipients ought to be awestruck in the act of receiving. No, rather, *“we walk by faith, not by sight,”* (2 Corinthians 5:7)