

The Four-fold Presence of Christ

When the bishops met for the Second Vatican Council, one of the key principles they put forth regarding the liturgy is that Christ is present in the liturgy in four unique ways. These ways are:

- especially, in the Eucharist broken and shared;
- in the person of the minister;
- in the Word of God; and
- in the assembled people of God (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy , CSL #7).

This principle is considered so important that the Church continues to remind us that Christ is present to us and in us in not just one or two, but in four, different and special ways whenever we celebrate liturgy. Let us look at each of these four presences of Christ that we experience—whether consciously or not—each time we participate in Mass, any of the sacraments, or the Liturgy of the Hours.

In the most recently published General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which guides priests and other liturgical ministers in celebrating the Mass, the first presence of Christ mentioned is that of his presence in the assembled people of God (GIRM #27). Christ is present when the assembly is gathered in his name. This is just as he had promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). Therefore, every time we come together to pray and sing in any of the Church’s liturgies, Christ is present in and with us.

A second way in which Christ is with us in the liturgy is in the person of the minister. Christ is present to us in the priest, who is called the presider, or priest celebrant of the liturgical assembly. The presider leads the community in prayer and helps us to understand the words and actions of the liturgy. When he does so, he also acts in the person of Christ, on our behalf. The presider does this by the way he acts and speaks—

with dignity, reverence, and humility—so that the living presence of Christ is conveyed in and through him (GIRM #93).

A third form of Christ’s four-fold presence to us in any liturgy we celebrate is in the Word of God. No matter whether we participate in a Mass, the other sacraments, or the Liturgy of the Hours, we always hear the Word of God proclaimed in Scripture. Whether that reading is from the Old or New Testament, Christ is present in that Word. In fact, at the beginning of John’s Gospel, we hear that Christ **IS** the Word of God. He is God speaking to us. And so each time we hear God’s Word, from the law, a prophet, a psalm, a gospel, a letter, or any other Scripture passage, Christ is there for us and with us.

The fourth way Christ is present to us in the liturgy is in what the Church calls the “eucharistic species.” This is the pre-eminent presence of Christ. Christ is especially present in the bread and wine that become the Body and Blood of Christ. What looks like bread and wine has truly become Christ’s Body and Blood by the “taking, blessing, breaking and sharing” of the presider and the assembly gathered and by the grace of God. Was it not in the “breaking of the bread” that the disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus present with them?

Therefore, when we receive these sacred elements, we become even more the Body of Christ. “We become,” as St. Augustine reminded the Church in the 4th-5th centuries, “what we eat and drink.” In other words, we become Christ present, and the cycle begins again—Christ present in the gathered assembly, in the presider, in the Word of God proclaimed, and in the Eucharist broken and shared.