



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Presentation

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extraordinary ministers of holy communion: ministry and practice

Through our Baptism we are all called to serve. One of the ways in which you're being called to serve is as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.

I was thinking about what it is we communicate through that ministry and I guess, more than anything else, what we communicate is the presence of Jesus so this afternoon we're going to reflect on the Presence of Christ.

I came across this story a while back that some of you may have heard before:

There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed a little bag with biscuits and lemonade. After about half an hour he went into the park to have something to eat and drink and met an old woman. She was sitting just staring at some pigeons.

The boy sat down next to her and opened his bag. He was about to take a drink when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a biscuit. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her some lemonade. Once again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mum, what did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate biscuits in the park with God." But before her son responded, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

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LORD THAT I MAY SEE

A lot of the work we do at Irenaeus is helping people reflect on the Scriptures. I have a sneaking suspicion that the end of John's Gospel is all about presence and how we recognise the presence of the risen Jesus. Where do we find this Lord? One of the truths of John's Gospel is that we find the spiritual through the material.

What does that mean for us? I guess it means that if the incarnation means anything at all it means that God has chosen to be with us not in some vague other worldly sense but in the material of this world and that means everything is sacred for eyes that can see. Everything I often think that the biggest change in us that has to take place in the realm of awareness, of becoming aware of the God who is in all things and who is constantly trying to communicate with us. To become aware of the presence of the risen Jesus in our midst in every person that we look at, in every breath we take.

There's a sense in which our cry has to be that of the blind man 'Lord that I may see'. Free from my false perceptions and dualistic mentality that would see God in things that we call holy but not in things we call secular.

Free me from the attitudes of heart and mind that blind me to your presence so that I may see. I love the quotation from J. Oswald Sanders who said: "Eyes that look are common, eyes that see are rare."

EUCCHARIST

So what do we see when we begin to reflect on Eucharist?

Richard Rohr says of Eucharist that "you've got to comprehend any great mystery in one focused moment. Great truth must be put on small stages to be able to process and grasp its momentous significance. This is the sacramental principle. Believe it, struggle with it, comprehend it here, and then move beyond it and recognize what's true here is true everywhere!"

In other words when we take and eat of the bread of life it's so that we can change enough to see more clearly the presence of Christ everywhere. Our ministry is to help people see more clearly the truth that Christ is everywhere.

THE CHRISTIAN STORY

The Christian story reveals the truth that God is everywhere and to be communicators of the presence of God is to become aware of the God's presence in all things. I once heard of a missionary who was teaching the indigenous people about the sacraments. The people were told that there are seven sacraments through which God encounters us. Looking puzzled, one of the people responded by saying, "Why do you have only have seven? God is everywhere."

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CREATION

Just recently I was driving along the M6 and I got to the point in the middle of the lakes where the mountains soar on either side and the valleys dip low. Often the tops of the mountain are wreathed in mist as they were this day and I as I drove I was filled with a sense of awe and wonder and just looking at the view and the scenery I sensed the presence of God. The truth is that God is everywhere and in everything but often we don't have eyes to see.

It's why as Christians we have to be concerned with the environment and have to have respect for creation because God is in it all. Sadly all too often we don't have that respect and we milk creation for all it can give us. Pope Francis has recently remarked that "Right now, we don't have a very good relationship with creation."

St Bonaventure used to talk of the footprints of Christ being everywhere. Look around you and see the beauty of God and respect what we have been given.

HUMANITY

In his letter *Redemptor Hominis* John Paul II said that "In every human person is the spirit of God whether they acknowledge it or not."

Some years ago I was in Madrid, which is a wonderfully cosmopolitan city with people of all sorts of persuasions adding to its vibrancy and colour. As we walked back towards our hotel one night we stopped in a fairly large and busy square. It was about two in the morning but you'd have thought it was the middle of the afternoon.

While we were there a minibus pulled up and a group of young people jumped out and began to move around the square talking to people who obviously lived on the streets. I watched one young girl as she sat down next to what looked like a pile of newspapers. They were hiding a woman.

As they talked the woman took off her shoes and socks. Her feet were in a terrible state, bleeding and ulcerated and the girl opened one of the flasks she had with her and poured water over the woman's feet and very tenderly dried the woman's feet on her skirt.

It was like watching the Gospel in action. It was such a powerful moment. Here was this woman, rejected by the vast majority of society meeting in that young girl compassion and tenderness.

As I watched I was suddenly aware of the presence of God in that Girl's compassion and love but also in the woman's vulnerability and brokenness. God is present in every human person and you know just as we genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament so we should treat each human person in the same way.

Pope Francis has recently said:

"I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of



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a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else - God is in this person's life. You can - you must - try to seek God in every human life. Faith calls us to see."

THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Constitution on the Church tells us, 'As all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so also are the faithful in Christ.'

It's a way of saying that together we form the body of Christ and yet often within our parishes there are all sorts of divisions between this group and that group and this person and that person. There are people who go mad when there's too much noise in Church and those who are only happy in the midst of noise. We argue about Latin or the vernacular, new hymns versus old hymns, UCM against the Prayer group.

We are the body of Christ. Just as Christ is within every individual so he's there in the community that gathers. Treat your Church communities with respect. Have time to spend with those you worship with. God is present.

THE WORD OF GOD

St Jerome said, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Jesus".

The constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says; "Christ himself is speaking when Scripture is read in Church."

As I was reflecting on the presence of Christ in the word. I was reminded of two parishes one in Tanzania and one in Manila in the Philippines where I was taken to a Bible study group. In both cases the people had nothing and yet there were hundreds gathered. Men and women who were reading the Scriptures and finding in them a real source of life. For them the Word of God had power and there was an excitement about them as they told me that God was their Saviour each day. We don't seem to have the same sense of urgency to pray reflect and act on the Word of God.

SACRAMENTAL ENCOUNTERS

Many years ago there was a book written by an American sister called Anne Therese Sheilds. In the book which is called, 'And their eyes were opened', she wrote, "Sacraments are an encounter with the Living Lord".

It's a way of saying that Christ is really present in the seven Sacraments. One of the ways the presence of Christ is expressed is in the celebration of the Eucharist / Mass that has been the source and summit of the church's life since the very beginning. We eat of the bread of life. We receive the Living Lord to heighten our awareness of the sacredness of all that is around us and to help us see.

Lucien Deiss in his book 'It's the Lord's Supper' says, "In actual fact we may hold that there is only one Real Presence and that it expresses itself in different ways."

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In other words all the ways that we meet Christ are equal. His presence is in the world around us, in the people we gather with and meet each day, in the word we hear, and in the sacrament we receive. No one presence is any greater than the other.

Just a couple of questions to reflect on...

Where have I encountered the presence of Christ? Where do I communicate that presence?

THE CHALLENGE OF THE MINISTRY

And so it is left to me to try and lead our reflection into how does all of this about the presence of God affect our ministry as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.

I was reading an article by Joe McCloskey SJ on Eucharist and challenge, he certainly said some very challenging things similar to what Chris has been sharing and things that are important for us as Eucharistic Ministers he was speaking about being Eucharist for others and sharing Eucharist, he said this “Christ giving the Eucharist and being one with us needs to meet with our giving Eucharist and being one with him. If Christ is to be recognized in the breaking of the bread, then the Christ of our hearts will burst forth when we can be recognized by the giving of our lives. Eucharist is our life as gift. We have to choose to give the gift of our love and our life.”

And he goes on to say: “The strength of our commitment to community and the way we offer our time and energy to each other makes Eucharist come alive as a radical statement of who we are in Christ.”

Richard Rohr explains it as being a two way mirror: “God simply wants mirroring images of God to live on this earth and to make the divine visible.”

And we find this in 2 Corinthians: “We, with our unveiled faces gradually receive the brightness of the Lord, and we grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

And so the challenge as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.

We all work in different environments and minister to many different people who are in various states of illness there are many different reasons as to why they are unable to join the community in celebrating the Eucharist at the church. How we celebrate the sharing of Eucharist is really important.

SHARING COMMUNITY

If we think of what Chris has outlined – how do we bring the community to the person? How do we enable the person feel that they are part of the community and not isolated? There are different ways of doing this and I know that many of you already share the newsletter. We need to enable people to know what’s going on, to speak about parish events - making sure where possible people do get chance now and again to join services whenever possible.

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It's about a sense of belonging as many become very isolated if they live alone. Creating an awareness of God's presence.

Having had an accident and not been able to get to church and share in the Eucharist recently, I have come to realise how important this ministry is. I think it is important to create an atmosphere and make our sharing of the Eucharist more of an event, which can be done very simply and of course we keep in mind the person and their situation. We have amazing technology at our finger tips. I wonder how many of us have a phone that has music on or with the help of all the youngsters around us we could get music put on it. Very simple. It's important if we enter someone's home to have a chat with them about what is going on in the parish, to take that opportunity to share community but also create a simple liturgical space and time, to place the pix somewhere on a coffee table if possible and maybe a small cross just to create something familiar, recognising the Lord's presence. At this point we could play a little quiet music just to still ourselves. I know that this isn't always possible but in some instances I am suggesting we become a little more creative in what we do.

Pope Francis in his recent encyclical said: "God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded." *Gaudate et Exsultate* 135

This is our ministry in sharing Eucharist with the wounded and those on the fringes of our community.

Creating an awareness of God's presence

And so in our ministry, we may, depending on the person and their situation have a little quiet moment to reflect on our life and the love of God.

GOD PRESENT IN THE WORD

And then to share scripture. As Chris has stressed God is as present in the Word and people, as in the Eucharist. It is essential that we share the word of God. We need to prepare what we are going to read. Maybe it will be the Gospel, just a paragraph of one of the readings or even in the situation where someone is very ill - just a sentence or word. There are many ways that we can do this, we don't need to stumble through long readings. That's why it's important that we prepare in advance what we are doing.

As we share the Eucharist, it is a sacred moment. It is this two-way mirror to Christ in our lives - a two-way mirror of sharing community and this moment must be recognised... to pause, to have a time of silent or where appropriate a little quiet music. In our conclusion we must recognise the presence of God in this encounter, not in just presenting the Eucharist but in the whole encounter.

Let's just take a moment.

There's a lot in what we have said today, and our purpose is to enable you to be aware of God's presence in your ministry and in some ways to prompt you into reflecting on how you carry out your ministry. Of



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course, we need to be aware of each individual and situation in which we minister. At times there will be people who are living with dementia and, for them, familiarity will be important. There will be many who are very sick and don't have the energy for long chats and liturgy this is where you use your experience of the person and adapt your ministry recognising they meet God in your presence - in the Word of God and in the environment as well as in actually receiving Holy Communion.

We invite you now just to talk amongst yourselves.

What has challenged you? Is there anything - no matter how small - that you can take away from what you have heard today and implement in your ministry?

As we conclude this time together we pray in the words of Pope Francis:

May you come to realise what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life.

Let yourself be transformed.

Let yourself be renewed by the spirit, so that this can happen, lest you fail in your precious mission.

The Lord will bring it to fulfilment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural grace, which purifies and enlightens. Gaudete et Exsultate 24.