

CHRIST IS PRESENT IN THE DIOCESE AND THE PARISH

Christ's living presence among his followers is referred to by various Vatican II documents and supported by Scripture. At the Last Supper, Jesus washes his apostles' feet and commissions them to be his witnesses in the world. Upon his death, Jesus hands over "the spirit" to them (John 19:30), creating complete continuity in his mission: in receiving the Spirit, the apostles *become* the body of Christ in the world. As a sign of this unique covenant, blood and water flow from Jesus' side - a pouring forth similar to Moses' sprinkling of blood upon the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 24:8). This imagery emphasizes that our participation in the body of Christ is real and concrete, not merely symbolic.

Unity through the Eucharist

Eucharisticum Mysterium notes that Christ is present "*par excellence*" in the Eucharist, but also in the body of the faithful (I, 9). *Lumen Gentium* further reminds us that Catholics everywhere are invited to participate in the mystical body of Christ (II, 11, 13). Viewing these concepts jointly reminds us that the presence of Christ is strongest when Catholics gather to receive the Eucharist. Today, on Corpus Christi Sunday, Paul's letter to the Corinthians emphasizes the importance of unity at the Lord's Supper: the Corinthians are to share the meal *together*. Not only should they remember Jesus at the Lord's Supper, but they are to "wait for one another" (1 Cor 11:33). Apparently the wealthier among the Corinthians had developed the habit of eating early, instead of waiting for the poor, who were delayed by work obligations. This is perhaps one of the Bible's greatest exhortations toward Christian unity: "wait for one another."

The Role of the Bishop

Following Jesus' death, house-churches were formed, where early Christians regularly gathered to share a meal proclaiming the Lord's death and resurrection. Over time, these house-churches became part of larger Christian communities, formulating the earliest parish-diocese structure. Leaders were chosen and by the late first century were referred to as *episcopos*, or bishops. All this

eventually developed into the church structure we know today: each parish belongs to a diocese, represented by a bishop who manifests the presence of Christ to the faithful (*LG*, III, 21).

Christus Dominus states that bishops ought to encourage the "right and duty" of the faithful to "play their part in building up the Mystical Body of Christ" (II, I, 16). This is no easy task! Our bishop now serves over a million Catholics. Yet when we consume Jesus' body and blood in the very literal way Jesus intended, we *become* part of the mystical body of Christ. Therefore, every time our bishops and priests celebrate Mass with us, we may participate in this body. The more of us gathered, the larger the body of Christ.

The Response of the Laity

Apostolicam Actuositatem mentions a variety of ways in which the laity may participate in the Mystical Body of Christ: through acts of charity, through participation in the liturgy, and by responding to "diocesan undertakings" as well as to parish activities (III, 10). As members of the church - the living body of Christ - we may achieve this in small ways: by welcoming newcomers, by extending the handshake of peace to someone sitting alone in the back of church, by fostering the strengths and ministries of each individual. On a larger scale, we can contribute to collections benefitting members of our diocese and the world-wide Christian community, or by offering prayers for others in need. Even those who can't attend mass because of illness or infirmity can offer up their sufferings as a way of uniting with Christ.

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). Christ's presence in our diocese and our parishes is not a misty, ethereal concept. Rather, when we come together we form the Body of Christ. Together, we may bear witness to the world with a strength and unity the twelve apostles could scarcely have imagined when Jesus first leaned over to wash their feet.

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