

Contemporaneity: The Mystery of Liturgical Time

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IN THE PERIOD after the Second Vatican Council, the balance between relevance and tradition, adaptation and conservation, inner and active participation, and dynamic and literal translation all occupied a central place in liturgical discussions, and led at times to passionate confrontations. Essential indeed were these issues in promoting an authentic liturgical renewal but, as almost always happens in history, they eclipsed, to the point of near total oblivion, a fundamental issue that, when ignored, distorts the proper understanding of liturgical participation. Faithful Catholics in the pew know that Christ becomes present on the altar, that they receive him in holy communion, and that they remember his death and resurrection in the Mass. They also know that in the other sacraments they receive Christ's grace adapted to the purpose of the respective sacrament. But they are largely unaware that in the liturgical action they enter liturgical time, the intersection of our time with eternity. If the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass remains for them a mere object of their own "liturgical imagination," and heaven is the mere object of future hope, they remain locked up within the narrow walls of their secular life. Yet, when we enter a Romanesque or Gothic cathedral or the modern chapel of Le Corbusier, we cannot help feeling that we entered another world whose dimensions enlarge and elevate our mind and heart. Is this merely an illusion imagined by the visitor, or could this world perhaps be more real than what one leaves outside? In other words, if there is liturgical space, should there not be also liturgical time? In the present article, I intend to take up a subject which had been a hotly debated topic in the first half of the twentieth century. I do not intend to provide an overview of the various theological positions in that near past, but rather to articulate and develop what seem to me their positive results.

Twentieth Century Reflections on Liturgical Time

While in the late Middle Ages and in the post-Tridentine period the focus of theological inquiry centered on the substantial presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine, in the first half of the twentieth century a number of dogmatic theologians and liturgists began to explore the presence of the “work of our redemption” in the liturgical actions of the Church. They referred to Christ’s redemptive work by the traditional term “the mysteries of Christ” or the “saving history of Christ,” which includes his conception, birth, earthly life, suffering, resurrection, and ascension. Odo Casel, a Benedictine of the Belgian Abbey of Maria-Lach, was the first to study the biblical and patristic evidence for what he called the *Mysteriengegenwart*, the presence of the redemptive mysteries in the liturgical actions of the Church.¹ The subsequent lively theological discussion centered on the apparent contradiction: Casel and followers claimed that Christ’s historical acts have an abiding presence in the liturgy, but others objected that a historical act necessarily becomes past or else it is not historical. Besides Casel, the most important theologians who tried to provide an intelligible explanation of the traditional data are Gottlieb Söhngen, Johannes Betz, Brian McNamara, and Edward J. Kilmartin.² As metaphysical studies became unpopular by the last decades of the twentieth century, the issue of the *Mysteriengegenwart* also disappeared from among the relevant themes of theological inquiry.

I first intend to survey the data of the Tradition on the presence of the redemptive work of Christ in the liturgy, and then offer an explanation of what constitutes “liturgical time.”

¹ A complete bibliography of his works is available: D. Praxedes Bienias, “Bibliographie von DDR. P. Odo Casel OSB,” in *Vom Christlichen Mysterium: Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von Odo Casel*, ed. A. Mayer, J. Quasten, and B. Neunheuser (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1951) 363–75. Of particular interest is Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962).

² Gottlieb Söhngen, “Symbol und Wirklichkeit im Kultmysterium,” in *Grenzfragen zwischen Theologie und Philosophie* (Bonn, 1940); Söhngen, “Die Kontroverse über die kultische Gegenwart des Christumysteriums,” *Catholica* 7 (1938): 114–49; Söhngen, “Christi Gegenwart in uns durch den Glauben,” in *Die Einheit in der Theologie* (Munich: Karl Zink, 1952), 324–69; Lothar Lies, “Zur Eucharistielehre von Johannes Betz,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 128 (2006): 53–80; Brian McNamara, “Christus Patiens in Mass and Sacraments: Higher Perspectives,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 42 (1975): 17–35; Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 267–386.

Scripture

In the first half of the twentieth century, form-critical studies by K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolph Bultmann asserted that many of the pre-Gospel pericopes that later became the building blocks of the Gospels originated in a Eucharistic setting. Recently, Denis Farkasfalvy reformulated their theory and successfully argued for the Eucharistic provenance of most Gospel pericopes. The “words and deeds of Jesus” were remembered, told, retold and shaped in the Eucharistic gatherings not as mere subjective memories of what he did and said in his earthly life and post-resurrection appearances, but with the awareness that his words and deeds are contemporaneous to each Eucharistic celebration. He himself continues to speak and act in the Eucharistic celebration: he comes, or is approached, he comforts and reprimands, forgives and chastises, heals and feeds the community, and extends to them the presence of his Kingdom in his Eucharistic presence among them.³

In particular, the dying and rising of Jesus are somehow part of the Eucharistic celebration according to Paul. He finishes the institution narrative by reminding the Corinthian faithful: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).⁴ The Lukan narrative of the disciples going to Emmaus suggests the structure of a Eucharistic celebration: first, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them all that referred to him in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27), and only after this “Liturgy of the Word” does he reveal himself in “the breaking of the bread.” It seems that Luke wants to show us that in the Church’s Eucharistic worship the Emmaus story is represented, and thus in some sense becomes present to believers at every celebration.

In addition to the exegetical evidence from the Gospels, a theological analysis of the word of God in the Bible points in the same direction. One essential difference between a mere human writing and a biblical text consists in the difference of their origin. While the human writing contains a message of a mortal man who wrote the text in the past and may no longer be alive at the time when it is read, the transcendent author of the biblical text is God who transcends time, and therefore his word is always “living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb

³ See Denis Farkasfalvy, *A Theology of the Christian Bible: Revelation, Inspiration, Canon* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), with ample bibliography.

⁴ Note that the text does not simply mean a homily on the death of the Lord, but that the Eucharistic celebration itself proclaims it.

4:12). Its connatural locus is the liturgical celebration which, in fact, considers its biblical texts as God's actual word to the assembly. If God speaks in the present, his message must also be relevant to the present.⁵

The Fathers of the Church

Many Fathers, both in the East and the West, wrote about and contemplated the presence of the action and Passion of Christ in the Eucharist. For instance, Theodore of Mopsuestia writes:

We inscribe the vision of heavenly realities into our mind insofar as we remember that Christ who has died, risen and ascended into heaven for us, is being even now offered by means of these symbols; as we look with our eyes in faith at the signs of the memorial that has been now performed, we are led to see that he still dies, rises and ascends into heaven—(all) that took place once for us.⁶

That in the liturgy no new self-offering of Christ takes place, neither by Christ nor by the priest, another text makes abundantly clear: "Evidently, the bishop accomplishes an offering; however, this offering is neither new nor his own, rather it is the memorial of that offering (of Christ's)."⁷

Theodore also teaches that not only Christ enters the heavenly sanctuary, but so do his people in the Eucharist:

[The author of Hebrews] called the veil [of the Temple] the flesh of the Lord, for it is through this flesh that we enjoy our entry into the holy of holies. Just as the high priest according to the Law entered the holy of holies through the veil and it was impossible for him to enter in any other way, thus the believers in Christ enjoy their heavenly citizenship through the reception of the most holy body [of Christ].⁸

St. Ambrose likewise insists that the mysteries of Christ become present in the Eucharistic celebration by the very fact that we commemorate them:

⁵ See Farkasfalvy, *A Theology*, 60–62.

⁶ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Homiliae catecheticae* 15.20 (all translations from patristic sources are my own). Our interpretation, of course, presupposes that the liturgical anamnesis (memorial) is a share in God's memory that transcends time.

⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Homiliae catecheticae* 15.15.

⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Interpretatio in xiv epistulas Sancti Pauli*.

Therefore, whenever you receive [the Eucharist], what did the Apostle tell you [about it]? Whenever we receive it, we announce the forgiveness of sins. If, whenever the blood is poured out, [it] is poured out for the forgiveness of sins, I must always receive it so that it may always forgive my sins. I who always sin must always receive a medication [for sin].⁹

Not only his passion becomes present to the participants, but also his resurrection and ascension:

So you hear that whenever the sacrifice is offered, the death of the Lord, the resurrection of the Lord, the ascension of the Lord as well as the forgiveness of sins are represented; and you would not receive this bread of life daily? . . . "Give us this day our daily bread." If you receive it every day, every day is today for you. If Christ is for you today, he rises for you every day. How? "You are my Son, today I begot you" (Ps 2:7). Today is when Christ rises from the dead. According to the Apostle Paul, "He is yesterday and today" (Heb 13:8). Yet, at another place he says: "The night has passed away, the day has arrived" (Rom 13:12). [In other words], the Night of yesterday has passed away, the Day of today has drawn near.¹⁰

It seems that, according to Ambrose, whenever we receive the Eucharist, we share in the eternal present, the eternal Today of the risen Christ, a presence that in some way includes the mysteries of his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.¹¹

Both the Eastern and Western Church, the Eastern in the patristic age and the Western in the Middle Ages, attempted to explain the mystery by transforming the Eucharistic liturgy into an allegory. Each event of the Passion and resurrection was imagined to appear in temporal sequence on the altar, symbolized by different gestures and words of the priest.¹² This approach helped to satisfy the imagination, but it threatened to degrade the mystery to the level of mere allegory.

⁹ St. Ambrose, *De sacramentis* 4.27. At the same time, Ambrose insists that only those should share in Holy Communion who are purified by baptism and live so that they may deserve to receive the Eucharist every day (see 5.25).

¹⁰ St. Ambrose, *De sacramentis* 5.25–26.

¹¹ See also St. Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 58.

¹² For instance, the beating of the breast by the priest at the *nobis quoque peccatoribus* of the Roman Canon would signify the piercing of Jesus's breast by the lance of the Roman soldier.

In modern times theologians in the East and West abandoned the allegorical explanation because they realized that the presence of the mysteries of Christ transcends the dividedness of ordinary time. In the liturgical action the mystery is present in its totality, rather than in temporal sequence.

Liturgy

According to St. Bernard, the eternal newness and renewing power of Christ accounts for his new birth within us at every Christmas:

What always renews our minds remains always new; what bears fruit unceasingly and does not decay will never become old. This is the holy [thing] which is not allowed to see corruption. This is the new man who is unable to grow old in any way whatsoever and who transfers into the true newness of life those whose every bone has grown old. This is the reason—if you noticed—that, in the present most joyous annunciation, we say appropriately not that he was born but that he is being born: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is being born in Bethlehem of Judea.” Just as in some way he is immolated every day while we announce his death, it seems that he is also being born as long as we faithfully represent his birth to our minds. Thus, tomorrow we will see the majesty of God, but in ourselves not in himself; that is, we will see majesty in humility, power in weakness, God in man.¹³

It is enough to take a cursory glance at the texts of the great feasts of the liturgical year. We celebrate the entire divine drama of our redemption, and in the time of the liturgical action we are always present in the “today” of the event we celebrate. Let us look only at some samples. On Christmas night, the Church sings with exuberant joy:

Today true peace descended for us from heaven,
today everywhere in the world the heavens drop down honey.
Today the new day of redemption lit up,
the end of a long preparation, the day of eternal joy.¹⁴

Similar is the jubilation of the Magnificat antiphon. The Church, as it

¹³ Bernard of Clairvaux, Christmas Vigil Sermon 6: on the Proclamation.

¹⁴ Responsory to the second reading of the Office of Readings, in *Liturgia Horarum*, vol. I (Rome: Editrice Vaticana, 1985), 350 (my translation).

were inebriated, cannot repeat enough the word *Hodie* (Today):

Today Christ was born, today the Savior appeared,
today angels sing on earth, the archangels rejoice,
the just exult and sing: Glory to God in the highest!

In the Holy Thursday Mass, before the consecration the priest adds to the words of the Roman Canon: “On the day before he was to suffer, *that is, today*, he took bread . . .” In the solemn praise of the Easter Candle on Holy Saturday night, the deacon’s exulting song returns nine times to the solemn conviction that “This is the night . . . O truly blessed night” of the Jewish Passover and Christ’s resurrection. We find the emphasis on the “today” also in the offices of the Ascension and Pentecost. It appears that in these celebrations the Church enters God’s eternity, and in faith shares God’s perspective in which the entire salvation history is present.

Magisterium

Pius XII was the first pope who taught that the mysteries of Christ’s life, Passion and resurrection are in some way present in the liturgy:

The liturgical year, devotedly fostered and accompanied by the Church, is not a cold and lifeless representation of the events of the past, or a simple and bare record of a former age. It is rather Christ Himself who is ever living in His Church. Here He continues that journey of immense mercy which He lovingly began in His mortal life, going about doing good (Acts 10:38), with the design of bringing men to know His mysteries and in a way live by them. These mysteries are ever present and active not in a vague and uncertain way as some modern writers hold, but in the way that Catholic doctrine teaches us.¹⁵

Pius XII does not explain how “Catholic doctrine teaches us” this reality, but from the context it appears that the mysteries of Christ are present by influencing us and causing our salvation, each in its own way.

Pope Saint John Paul II resumes the same topic in his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. He writes from personal experience:

For over a half century, every day, beginning on 2 November 1946,

¹⁵ Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (1947), §165.

when I celebrated my first Mass in the Crypt of Saint Leonard in Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, my eyes have gazed in recollection upon the host and the chalice, where time and space in some way “merge” and the drama of Golgotha is re-presented in a living way, thus revealing its mysterious “contemporaneity” [cum suam arcanam “contemporalem” praesentiam manifestaret].¹⁶

John Paul formulates also the basic principle of this contemporaneity:

The Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift—however precious—among so many others, but as *the gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work. Nor does it remain confined to the past, since “all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times.”¹⁷

It is evident from these texts that John Paul asserts not only the personal presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but also the presence of his redemptive work. As is the general practice of the magisterium, the pope does not take sides in the theological debates on *how* this presence should be explained, but simply states the faith of the Church: “All that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times.”

An Attempt to Explain the Data

The inspection of two major issues should help us attain an intelligible formulation of Christ’s manifold presence in the liturgy: (1) the dynamics of Christ’s acts and sufferings, and (2) our participation in them through faith.

The Dynamics of Christ’s Acts and Sufferings

I presuppose here a Christology that takes seriously the human development of the incarnate Son. As an embodied spirit, the human being cannot determine himself fully by one free act of will. Even though the earthly Jesus is not burdened by the concupiscence of original sin, the law of gradual self-determination by a series of free decisions applies also to him,

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), §59.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §11. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1085.

since its cause is the complexity of the human being, its composition of body and soul. Even if the human soul had not fallen, its will and spiritual energies would still operate through the body, and could thus integrate and guide its forces only gradually, in a temporal process that follows the biological and psychological laws of human development.¹⁸ As the child Jesus becomes gradually capable of conscious and free acts, his awareness of being the Son of the eternal Father also grows in depth and clarity. In an ineffably close communion with the Father, Jesus listens to his inspiration, obeys the instructions of Mary and Joseph, and searches the Scriptures as he carries out step by step the Father's will. In this way, he subjects his existence piecemeal, through its entire temporal extension, to the Father. Since Jesus the man obeys the Father in the Holy Spirit with an infinite love, his every act and suffering in love is of infinite value. With his last cry on the Cross—*Tetelestai*, "It has been completed" (John 19:30)—he brings every moment of his earthly life under God's rule through the Holy Spirit; when he dies, every act of his will and mind and every layer of his human nature have become, through the Holy Spirit, the human expression of the Son's eternal love for the Father.

The Father raises up Jesus on the third day, the Jesus whose humanity is now fully transformed and glorified by the Holy Spirit, to the extent that Saint Paul feels justified in writing that "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17). This Spirit-filled divinized Christ (which perfects rather than annihilates his humanity) has entered the realm of God and shares in his eternity. All that Christ did and suffered has become part of his glorified existence; and since Christ acted and suffered in our place and for us, our individual salvation history is a growing participation in Christ's actions and sufferings—not in their external circumstances, but in the infinite love that has animated them.

Saint Thomas Aquinas does not speak about the contemporaneity of Christ's acts and sufferings with human history, but he does clarify their metaphysical foundation in two concise texts:

Even though the suffering of Christ is a bodily suffering, it possesses spiritual power from the divinity that is united to it. And so it becomes effective by spiritual contact through faith and the sacraments of faith according to the apostle's words: "... whom [God] has presented as reconciler in his blood through faith."¹⁹

¹⁸ For more details, see Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ. Fundamentals of Christology*, 3rd ed. (Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 2018), 372–81.

¹⁹ *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 48, a. 6, ad 2: "... passio Christi, licet sit corpora-

Thomas affirms, as John Paul II will as well, the redeeming and transforming causality of Christ's entire history: all that Christ did and suffered acts upon us *per spiritualem contactum*, as does his resurrection:

The resurrection of Christ is not, strictly speaking, the meritorious cause of our resurrection. It is the efficient and exemplary cause. The efficient causality is through the humanity of Christ in which the resurrection took place and which is like an instrument acting in the power of divinity. Therefore, just as all other things which Christ in his humanity accomplished or suffered for us are saving acts through the power of his divinity, so too is his resurrection the efficient cause of ours through the same divine power whose proper effect is to raise the dead to life. This power is extended by being present in all times and places, and this contact of power is sufficient to fulfill the definition of efficient causality.²⁰

Aquinas does not explicate in the above contexts what he means by a *spiritual* contact. We know, however, from his entire opus that he shares the conviction of Scripture and Tradition about the intimate bond between Christ and the Spirit: Christ always operates through the Holy Spirit and, thus, his entire saving work, life, death and resurrection, operates in us through the same Spirit who dwells both in him and in us.

Thomas does not draw the conclusion from the causal influence of Christ's acts and sufferings to their contemporaneity with us, but we can hardly avoid drawing this conclusion. If we are worked upon by the acts and sufferings of Christ, Christ himself must be in some sense present to us in his acts and sufferings. As long as he is working upon us, the distances of time and space disappear between us.

It is not sufficient to conclude that he induces in us similar attitudes and dispositions to his own. He conforms our being to his, and offers us a share in his own love. The Fathers speak about the birth and growth of Christ within us in the sense that Christ relives his life in us in its various stages. For example, we share in the child Jesus's trust in his Father, in his compassion for those who are suffering, and in his anger at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. We unite ourselves to his total gift to the Father and participate in the energies of the risen Christ already in this life and then fully in our

lis, habet tamen spiritualem virtutem ex divinitate unita. Et ideo *per spiritualem contactum* efficaciam sortitur, scilicet per fidem et fidei sacramenta, secundum illud apostoli, quem proposuit propitiatorem per fidem in sanguine eius."

²⁰ ST III, q. 56, a. 1, ad 3.

dying with him. This process of participation in Christ is not limited to the level of intellect, will, and emotions. Acting and suffering with and in Christ presupposes and promotes an ontological conformation to him.

The Role of Faith and the Holy Spirit

I mentioned at the beginning that the main objection to the presence of the saving acts of Christ in the mysteries of the liturgy was the time-bound unrepeatability of a historical act. This problem, I believe, can be solved by examining the potential of the act of supernatural faith informed by love. By accepting God's revelation on account of Christ's witness, we are allowed to enter into the infinite dimensions of the triune God. Saint Bernard describes faith in these terms:

What would faith not find? It reaches what is inaccessible, grasps what is unknown, comprehends immensity, apprehends the end of history; in its immense lap, faith includes in some way eternity itself. I say with confidence: I believe the eternal and blessed Trinity whom I don't understand and I hold by faith what my mind does not grasp.²¹

If our faith includes God's eternity, with the eyes of faith we can share in the Father's contemplation of his incarnate Son's journey on earth. Not by vision, but by mere naked faith we can walk with the Son and be united gradually to him by the Spirit of God who dwells both in the Son and within us. Just as the incarnate Son has expressed in his humanity his eternal relationship to the Father by the acts and sufferings of his human life, so too does he work out through the same Spirit his own image within us by conforming, step by step, our acts and sufferings to his own. To the extent of the measure of his grace and our cooperation, we grow in similarity and union with him until the end of our earthly life.

It is true that the acts and sufferings of Jesus took place in time once, and now they belong to the past and are unreachable by our time-bound this-worldly existence. But by faith we share in God's realm that transcends time and for whom the history of his Son is present in its temporal sequence. Moreover, every act and suffering of Christ has been animated by his infinite divine-human love, and thus their transforming and sanctifying power is inexhaustible and works on everyone who by faith and love open themselves to their transforming activity.

The primary locus in which this redemptive history of Christ operates

²¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 76 on Song of Songs, no. 6.

on us is the celebration of the sacraments. They conform us to Christ according to the finality of each sacrament. In baptism we die with Christ to sin and are reborn in Christ; in confirmation we are empowered to reach maturity so as to bear witness to Christ. In the sacrament of penance we are reinstated into our life with Christ as the obstacles to growth, our venial sins, are removed. In the sacrament of the anointing of the sick we are conformed to Christ in our sufferings of illness, and in the sacraments of marriage and holy orders we are enabled to sanctify our new state of life by a new relationship to Christ. Thus, each sacrament connects us with Christ under a different aspect of his saving work. Since presence means a cause-and-effect relationship, Christ is present to us and within us under the aspect of each sacrament's sanctifying activity.

As said above, Christ is present in the other sacraments only through the effects of his activity within the recipient; his Eucharistic presence, however, is of a different kind. He reveals himself not only *within us* through his sanctifying work, but also in a personal encounter *with us*. We meet him as a person, both revealed and veiled in the impersonal species of bread and wine. He is the risen, glorified Christ who lives in God's eternity, and thus his completed saving history is present to him. Even in the life of a saintly person, all that was valuable in his earthly life becomes part of his final identity; he would not be himself without his history. This, however, is only a faint analogy to show the inseparable link between the history and the identity of the risen Lord. In the Eucharistic celebration, we enter God's eternity through faith so that the saving history of Christ might become contemporaneous to us. We are invited to share in his perfect self-offering which begins with his birth, is consummated on the Cross, and then is eternalized in the resurrection. Psychologically, it would be impossible for us to focus simultaneously upon each mystery of his life and death, and so the feasts in the cycle of the liturgical year allow us to participate through each particular mystery in the one integral saving mystery of Christ.

While the Eucharistic celebration is the effective sacramental sign of our personal union with and conformation to Christ, we need to be prepared to personally unite our gift of self with his perfect sacrifice. Daily or at least frequent meditation is a powerful means to deepen personal participation in the Mass.²² In a real sense, however, even our personal

²² See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 79, a. 1, ad 1: "No one receives grace before the reception of this sacrament [the Eucharist] except from some desire thereof." Thus all grace received, no matter when and where, derives from, and directs us toward, the Eucharist.

meditation, in so far as it is helped by grace, is already an anticipation of the Eucharist since the Eucharist is Christ and all grace comes from Christ and draws us to Christ.

Most Catholics, however, believe that in personal meditation, though God does help our prayer, we are left to our own resources when imagining the scenes from the life of Jesus. Yes, we need our imagination in order to reconstruct the scenery and the events according to our taste, strengths, and limitations. What we often do not realize, however, is the fact that our imagination reaches beyond subjective memories of Christ on earth. Through faith, our imagination enters God's eternity in which Jesus's history is eternally present, and our meditation allows this history to become contemporaneous to us and to transform us.

One may react to our reasoning as very little different from what Catholics in the pew have always believed. Every Christian knows that by meditation we contact not a mere figure of the past but the living Lord. But most of us do not realize that the history of the risen Christ is also truly present to us in our act of faith. In some real sense, we walk with Jesus, we act and suffer with him. Each of us imagines Jesus differently as he heals the demoniac and the mother-in-law of Peter, as he multiplies the loaves, orders Peter to cast his net over the right side of the boat, and tells the little girl of Jairus, "Talitha koum"—"Little girl, get up," and we could add the many other events of his earthly life. Yet our acts of faith and love do not stop at our own images and thoughts, but through them *they get in touch with the real Jesus at one or another moment of his history as he is teaching, acting or suffering*. The intensity of his presence and his influence on us is in proportion to the measure of grace and to our faith and desire.

We also need to face a further question: what do we mean by the history of Jesus as it exists in eternity and is contemporaneous to us? Are the pain, the blood, the nails, and the last gasping breath of Jesus present for us in every Eucharist and in every meditation? In general, are all the material features of that moment of history present in our act of faith? Since God transcends time, for him all of history is always present in its temporal sequence, historical unfolding and completion, in the exact particular way as it has actually happened. But what is present to us?²³ From the data of Scripture and Tradition, as outlined in the first part of this essay, we may

²³ Some of the saints claimed visions from the earthly life of Jesus, Mary and the saints. We can distinguish them from false subjective visions only in the light of the visionary's entire life story. But even in case of an authentic vision, God did not circumvent the saint's own psyche but revealed Jesus, Mary, or a saint to them through their own imagination.

conclude that every act of the earthly Jesus and every suffering he endured was motivated by his infinite love for his Father and for us. We could start with the words of the twelve-year-old adolescent to his parents when they find him in the temple, or quote a few examples of his Passion story, the desire to eat the Passover meal with his disciples, the gift of his Body and Blood to them and to the “many,” his warning to the weeping women, his prayer of asking forgiveness for his executioners, his words to the repentant criminal, his cry to God on the brink of despair, and his final cry, *Tetelestai*: “It has been accomplished.” In his every conscious act and his every reaction to his suffering, there was an ever-new act of infinite love expressed in many different forms. These acts, insofar as they expressed an infinite divine-human (theandric) love, are present to us, energizing and shaping us in the many similar situations of our lives. In summary, just as Christ on earth, interacting with the persons and events of his history, transforms his humanity into the human expression of his divine relationship with the Father, so too the risen Christ along with his transfigured earthly life enable us to live and act out our filial relationship to the Father.²⁴ All this takes place in the Eucharist, in the sacraments that apply the grace of the Eucharist to the different needs of us or through the desire, implicit or explicit, of the Eucharist in personal prayer and meditation.

Conclusion

In this essay I could provide only a tentative outline of what awaits further study. God transcends time, and thus the history of Christ on earth, as it happened in its painful bloody empirical reality, is always present to God in its temporal sequence. But insofar as the history of Christ expresses his divine-human love in many forms and in many situations (what St. Thomas calls his *acta et passa* and what modern theologians refer to as the *mysteria Christi*), it has become part of his eternally risen, glorified, and spiritualized existence. In this sense, then, all the events of Christ’s history extend his active presence through the full length of human history. His *acta et passa* transform all those who open up in faith to him, carving out in them the features of the Son of God and thus making us his brothers and sisters and children of his Father.²⁵

In the Eucharistic celebration, Christ himself becomes present in his

²⁴ The risen Christ breathes out his Spirit upon the disciples and makes his entire earthly life into a gift through the Holy Spirit (John 20:19–23).

²⁵ Christ alone had carried the full weight of all sins, abandoned by God and man, but now he first frees us from our sins and shares the energies of his risen life with us, and thus he actually carries our cross; we can only help him.

full divine-human reality for a personal encounter with us and to unite us with his act of self-surrender on the Cross both spiritually and sacramentally. In the other sacraments, he is present only through the effects of his reconciling and sanctifying activity.

As for us, we are enabled to enter into God's eternity through faith, where the mysteries of Christ can shape and form us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mere human acts are indeed essentially temporal and finite, but the divine-human acts of Christ participate in God's eternal actuality. The contemporaneity to our history of Christ's glorified existence along with his history obtains further intelligibility if we understand that this fact is one of the consequences of the Incarnation. Christ's human life on earth, his crucifixion, and his glorification were indeed contingent historical events, but they do not constitute a mere sequence of passing incidents. By assuming as his own a human nature, the eternal Son has become the transforming center of all history, and confronts every human being. For those who accept him in faith, the entire Christ event becomes transformative and therefore contemporaneous.²⁶

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²⁶ We cannot deal here with the different modes of confrontation: whether explicit or implicit, before or after the historical fact of the Incarnation. This would need a much longer discussion. That Christ calls for a response from every human being is a datum of revelation.