

The Lord Be With You
3rd Sunday of Easter (A)
(Lk 24:13-35)

The Church teaches (Vatican II, *Sancrosanctum concilium*, 7) there are four important ways the Risen Lord is present to his Church in the Liturgy, and they are illustrated in the Resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus. In this appearance, which occurred on Easter Sunday, Jesus celebrated the first Mass for the Church since the Last Supper, giving the Mass its form and structure.¹ The Mass is structured by the Lord according to the four ways he is present.

In the first way, Jesus “draws near” as the disciples gather in the context of the Paschal Mystery, i.e., in the context of “all these things” that happened to Jesus the Nazarene on that particular Passover weekend in Jerusalem (Lk 24:15). Jesus had said elsewhere, that “*whenever two or three gather in my name, there am I in their midst*” (Mt 18:20). When the Church gathers for the Liturgy, “in the Name of Jesus,” in the “Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” Jesus is immediately present. The Church gathers to pray, and it gathers in the context of the Cross and Paschal Mystery. Jesus is immediately present.

The Church signals this first presence of the Lord by that special liturgical greeting which immediately follows the sign of the Cross: “*The Lord be with you! And with your spirit!*” In the first way, while present to his Church, the Risen Lord nevertheless remains completely invisible, as the Gospel story also indicates: “*their eyes were kept from recognizing him*” (Lk 24:16).

While the disciples walk to Emmaus, the Risen Lord then proceeds to speak to them about the Scriptures, showing how the Paschal Mystery of our salvation is articulated in prophecy and fulfilled in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. He does this in a systematic way, beginning with Moses (i.e., the Law), and then all the prophets (Lk 24:27). The second way Jesus is present to his Church in the Liturgy is through the sacred Word of God, the Bible.

Beginning with the first pages of the Old Testament, the Church systematically shows in the lectionary cycle, how the law and prophets are fulfilled in the Gospel, that is, in the teachings, words, life, and death of Jesus. The first half of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, is the great ongoing dialogue and commentary between the Lord and his disciples, which began on Easter Sunday. And it is a journey that lasts not just a few hours, but a lifetime of years.

The Church signals this second presence of the Lord again by that special liturgical greeting which immediately precedes the Gospel: “*The Lord be with you!*”

¹ It is because of this resurrection appearance, that in the early Church the Mass was called the “Breaking of Bread” (Lk 24:35).

And with your spirit! In the second presence, while still invisible, the Risen Lord can be directly heard, as he speaks the living words of the Gospel. The disciples will later realize this: “*Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the way*” (Lk 24:32).

In the third way, the Risen Lord Jesus is present to his Church in the person of the priest. This is signaled in a subtle but meaningful way in the Gospel story when he is invited as a guest into the house of the disciples, yet immediately becomes the host of the meal to which they are the guests. Likewise, the Church prepares the banquet of the Liturgy, providing the “house” (the church building), as well as the table (altar) with its accessories (all the sacred vessels and linens). And above all, the gifts of bread and wine which will be consumed by the faithful.

However, it is the Lord who “takes over,” “presides,” and celebrates the Liturgy of the Eucharist for his people. This is the second half of the Mass. The Liturgy of the Eucharist has four essential parts, which are enumerated in the Emmaus Resurrection account, as well as in the accounts of the Last Supper, and in the earlier miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish, which prefigured the Mass (cf. Mt 14:19, Mk 6:41): Jesus “took the bread,” “said the blessing,” “broke the bread,” and “gave it his disciples (Lk 24:30). This corresponds to the 1) Offertory, the 2) Eucharistic Prayer, the 3) Preparation for Communion during which the host is broken, and 4) the distribution at Holy Communion.

The Church teaches that during this solemn moment of the sacrament of the Eucharist (as also in other sacraments), it is not the priest but Christ himself who acts. A priest, by his ordination, serves a very sacred function, which is to act not only “in the name” of Christ, but “in the person” of Christ, “*in persona Christi.*” Thus in the consecration of the Eucharist it is Christ who says, through the priest, “*This is my body... This is my blood.*”²

The Liturgy signals this third presence of the Lord in the person of the priest, by the liturgical greeting which begins the solemn Eucharistic prayer: “*The Lord be with you! Lift up your hearts! Let us give thanks.*” In the third presence, the Risen Lord can be heard, and is visible in human form, albeit that of the symbolically vested priest.³

Above all, it is the goal of the Lord in the Emmaus appearance, that his disciples recognize him “in the breaking of bread,” in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. For this reason, at the very moment the bread is broken, their eyes are fully opened to recognize Jesus, at which point he vanishes. What is left is the

² And in the sacrament of Penance it is Christ who says, through the priest, “*I absolve you from your sins.*”

³ The purpose of the sacred vestments is to “anonymize” the priest, so that it is his sacred role and not his individual personality which are highlighted.

Eucharistic Bread of Holy Communion. Jesus is teaching his Church the doctrine of the “Real Presence,” i.e., that in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, he himself is present, really and truly, “body, blood, soul, divinity.” By means of the blessing during which he speaks the words of consecration, the bread and wine are changed into his Flesh and Blood: “Take and eat, this is my body.” At the Last Supper he instituted the Eucharist, but the Last Supper was not the completion of the Mass. It still required the sacrifice of Good Friday and the Resurrection of Easter Sunday for its completion.

At Emmaus Jesus personally celebrates the first Mass for the Church. But in fact, it is Christ who celebrates every Mass, and by means of the Scriptural journey, prepares his Church each and every time to encounter him in the Eucharist. From time to time the Lord may again give his disciples that brief flash of recognition, helping them to recognize, as the two disciples did, that he is indeed risen and alive in the midst of the Church. This fourth and most important way the risen Lord is present in the Liturgy, is signaled by the greeting which introduces the Lamb of God and Holy Communion: “*The [peace of the] Lord be with you always... And with your spirit!*”

We should approach our participation in the Mass from the perspective of this Resurrection account, realizing that each Mass is part of a Scriptural journey, and each Mass leads to the personal encounter with the Risen Lord. We should therefore devote some time and effort to study and understand the Bible, so that our liturgical celebration will be more spiritually fruitful. And we should always come to Mass with the attitude of longing and desire that caused the disciples to invite and “press Jesus to stay” (Lk 24:29).

The last words of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are also significant: “go, you are sent” (*Ite, missa est*). The disciples immediately return to their companions following the Resurrection appearance at Emmaus (Lk 24:33). Likewise, it is from the Mass (“*missa*”) that we are “sent” back to the world, bearing the testimony of the Resurrection. It is here too, for the fifth and final time, that the liturgy confirms the reality in our midst, of Christ the Risen Savior: “*The Lord be with you... May almighty God bless you... Go, you are sent.*”