

The Eucharist, Imagined and Real

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There is an often-told story about a little boy who wakes up in the middle of the night from flashing lightning and booming thunder, terrified and crying out for his dad. His dad comes in and reassures him, “God is always here to take care of you.” Clinging on to his father, the boy blurts out, “But Dad, I need a God with skin on.”

If nothing else, Roman Catholicism is a religion with skin on. It is both a religion and its rituals that cover the body of persons, places and things where God through Christ and his Church is in, of and with flesh. A God whose real presence, with “skin on,” is truly incarnational.

It is a religion and ritual manifested in smells and bells, colors and fabrics, even saints and stories with gory and glory that one holds on and clings to in good times and bad. It is a religion that lives beyond black-and-white doctrinal words on paper through colorful, relatable stories in action.

The late Andrew Greeley, the American priest and sociologist, calls this word-made-flesh drama the “Catholic imagination,” a sensibility felt and experienced in the “raw power” of stories originating in our faith.¹

Greeley contrasts a cognitive understanding of the incarnation, resurrection and real presence of Christ in the sacraments with the underlying stories that have the power to attract persons to a faith through images in living color: a Madonna and child in a cave; joyous women and stunned men approaching an empty tomb and unknown strangers; and the tense drama of intimacy, suspense and even betrayal at the Last Supper.²

This grasp and hold through story and sensibility is imagined and extended in the Church’s sacramental life. It is amplified through persons, places and things made and emphasized as holy

by the expression “the real presence” of Christ in his church and the sacraments.

As described by the Council Fathers at the Second Vatican Council, “the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event in their [believers’] lives; they are given access to the stream of divine grace which flows from the Paschal mystery of the passion, death, the resurrection of Christ, the font from which all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power. There is hardly any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of men [and women] and the praise of God.”³

In Catholic health care, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are core to spiritual care. The Eucharist is not simply a regular routine, or an “administration” of a sacrament, but much more, both imagined and real.

Our Catholic sensibility imagines the body of Christ as real, present and accessible in persons (prayer, community, communion of saints), places (chapel and tabernacle) and things (the bread and wine). Our sensibility imagines a deeper story playing out daily in the ways the Eucharist is realized and experienced in and around our patients, residents and clients.

Even the physical structures of our facilities point to this sacramental sensibility: the crosses, chapels, prayers, music, statues, vestments,



flowers and, most importantly, the bread, wine, water and oil. All of these are “skin” experienced in Divine realities that can be seen, touched, smelled, heard and tasted.

The Eucharist is the daily bread Jesus teaches us to pray for (Matthew 6:9-13). We imagine and experience the real presence of the earthly body of Christ, his church as the living body of Christ, the tabernacle and chapel as the dwelling place of the body of Christ, the sacramental bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, and the vision of a transformed, heavenly body in the risen Christ.

The Eucharist is not simply a consecrated host distributed. The Eucharist is Christ at the Last Supper. The Eucharist is Christ in communion with the disciples at the Last Supper. The Eucharist is in the upper room where Christ and his disciples ate the Last Supper. The Eucharist is Christ in the bread lifted, taken, blessed, broken and given as his body and blood at the Last Supper. The Eucharist is the risen body promised and “proclaimed until he comes in glory.” This is the story.

Through an expanded and imagined sacramental sensibility, we bring color, shape and design to this originating story by a Eucharistic presence in our institutions that is revealed through Jesus as the Host Himself, the community as Host, the Host in the tabernacle, the Host in our hands and a vision of the Heavenly Host.

THE HOST

Christ is the Host himself, imagined and real, primarily through listening in prayer. With ears attentive, people listen to him.

Christ is real, present and accessible in personal and communal prayer. This is the conversation each of us enjoys in the inner sanctuary of one’s heart and soul. The Catholic imagination is in our individual practices and rituals, how we pray, to whom we pray and with what we pray.

Communally, the word is Christ speaking. The Scriptures are raised high; we stand, sing, listen to the proclamation and respond, individually and as a community.

Our Catholic sensibility is not limited to our Catholic tradition, as those of other faith tradi-

tions also bring their prayer practices and rituals to our facilities. So, too, gathered in communal prayer, individuals are in communion with their God, alone and together.

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is the real presence of the body of the person of Christ in prayer.

THE HOST IN COMMUNITY

The community of caregivers, imagined and real, is primarily through touching with care. Those with injury await his healing touch.

Christ is real, present and accessible to individuals and the caring community. We open the doors, wait and reach out. Nearly everyone entering our facilities is a stranger or alien isolated from the familiar by illness. Like the child in the

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is in the caregiver’s presence as the body of Christ touching those who are sick and suffering.

night storm, fear, anxiety and the unknown need a God with “skin on.”

With body, mind and soul injured, the person is touched by the caregiver, the body of Christ reaching out with healing hands.

The beautiful words of St. Teresa of Ávila could be the description of those who minister in our facilities:

“Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
compassion on this world. Yours are the feet
with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which he
blesses all the world. Yours are the hands,
yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are
his body. Christ has no body now on earth
but yours.”²⁴

Touch can be, and most often is, as deeply spiritual as physical. In all of the encounters a resident, patient or client has with the body of Christ in our caregivers, the touch itself provides healing through contact with a warmth of body and soul.

Some receive sacramentally a physical and spiritual touch through the “laying on of hands,” the rubbing of oil on the forehead and hands, or the Anointing of the Sick, particular to the situation. For example, these sacraments may be received before surgery, in terminal illness or due to advanced age.⁵

Our Catholic sensibility is not limited to our tradition. All caregivers who reach out with care and compassion — no matter their religious or spiritual tradition — are included as part of the body of Christ in Catholic health care facilities. Their compassion and care are that of the church they represent.

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is in the caregiver’s presence as the body of Christ touching those who are sick and suffering.

THE HOST IN THE TABERNACLE

The tabernacle, imagined and real, is experienced primarily by seeing with eyes of faith beyond that sacred place that reserves the hosts. It holds the power to see beyond its doors into sacred dwelling places.

Christ is real, present and accessible in holy places. The chapel doors open to a sacred space in our facilities where up front and center — by design and intent — the tabernacle sits. Eyes behold a candle’s flickering light signifying the presence of the body of Christ inside the innermost doors of this sacred space.

Like the Ark of the Covenant of the Hebrew Scriptures, the presence of God dwells in proximity to the believing community who reverence this holy reserve of the body and blood of Christ (2 Samuel:6, Psalm 132). Sometimes, the host is adorned in a gold monstrance for believers to focus on Christ in their praise, prayers and intercessions.

Having the body of Christ in a sacred place allows for quiet reflection and prayer away from the noise and nuisance of everyday busyness and business. This sacred space is private and public, individual and communal, sometimes one or the other or both.

Our Catholic sensibility of sacred space is not limited to our tradition. People of all faiths and spiritualities are welcome to come and rest awhile. Sometimes there are books with pens for writing prayer requests. Sometimes the seasons of the year — Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter

— display the colors and moods of expectation, joy, suffering, repentance and sorrow. Stations of the Cross, statues and votive candles all create a sense of laying down one’s burdens and looking up to see the unseen with yearning or satisfaction. The flickering light serves as a reminder that Christ is in this sacred place.

A Presbyterian minister who was director of pastoral care at a large Catholic hospital found the chapel and tabernacle a special place for him to pray. “Whenever I pray before the sacrament, I feel hot tears in my eyes, very different than my normal tears,” he explained. “Christ’s presence is very different in that space.”

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is looking up and seeing the sacred dwelling of the real presence of the body of Christ in the tabernacle.

THE HOST IN OUR HANDS

The body and blood of Christ, imagined and real, is primarily experienced in tasting the bread and wine through the sacramental action of eating and drinking.

Christ is real, present and accessible in the mystery of receiving his body and blood in the re-enactment of the Last Supper, a ritual of communion given as an immemorial gift to “do this in memory of me.” Central to Eucharistic teaching is that Christ is present sacramentally, not merely in symbol or sign. It is a presence different from Jesus’ earthly presence and different from Christ’s resurrected presence. However, this “real presence” in sacrament is no less a meeting, an encounter with Christ in his body.

The Church extends that sense of “real presence” to the other six sacraments, grouped as initiation, healing and life commitment. Here, the Catholic imagination engages and embodies the sights, sounds, touches, smells and tastes of God in Christ and his Church sacramentally. The sensibility experienced in the use of water, bread, wine, oil, white garments, lighted candles, the sign of the Cross, words of forgiveness and symbols represent a life commitment.

Our Catholic sensibility of sacraments is not limited to those in the Catholic tradition. Our facilities invite, even seek out, other ministers, rabbis and imams to perform and facilitate the rites and rituals for our patients, residents and clients of other faith traditions to provide them an encounter with the Divine.

Finally, the participation of those who are not Catholic in worship is powerfully symbolized by an invitation to come up to the altar with arms folded to receive a blessing from the one God over all of God's people. Although we may be different in communion, we are all still one before the Creator God.

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is realized in tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord in the consecrated body of Christ in the bread and cup (Psalms 34:9).

THE HEAVENLY HOST

The body of Christ, imagined and real, rising up to the heavens in "the communion of saints" is experienced through the power of smelling. "Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering." (Psalms 141:2)

Christ is real, present and accessible to those who have gone before us in faith. From the earliest creed comes the profession of a belief in "the communion of saints."⁶ As referenced earlier, the Eucharist is understood and professed in a faith rooted in the Paschal mystery embodied in Christ's passion, death and resurrection. This immemorial celebration given by Jesus in earthly history is promised and fulfilled in Christ in a heavenly eternity.

In the Catholic imagination, it is during the funeral rites — and especially in the final prayers of committal — that the body is surrounded with incense, symbolizing the Church's prayers rising up as the presider motions upward with the incense and the community sings and prays the soul to heaven.

The funeral is normally celebrated at the Eucharist, where the mystery of our faith is proclaimed in his death, resurrection and coming again. The body of a risen Christ into which the deceased once baptized into his death is now promised a share in his resurrection.

Our Catholic sensibility is not limited to our tradition. People die in our facilities and families mourn. In this understanding of a heavenly host, the body of Christ awaiting this final transformation is a sign of hope that we live and share.

In our Catholic imagination, the proclamation of faith is realized in how we revere the human body at the time of death with our vision of the body of Christ assumed in a heavenly host awaiting us — and our loved ones — in faith.

CONCLUSION

The Eucharistic minister holds up the host, or hands over the cup, and says, "The body of Christ, the blood of Christ." The recipient then responds in an act of faith and says, "Amen."

In our facilities, our Catholic imagination understands and offers a richer and fuller sensibility of the real presence of Christ in his body. Although offered to an individual as a sacramental host, it is so much more. The body of Christ is the host; Christ himself encountered in prayer; the body of Christ in the hosting community of caregivers; the body of Christ in the host reserved in the tabernacle; the body of Christ in the host in our hands; and the body of Christ transformed in the heavenly host of those gone before us.

And as a Catholic health care ministry, enabling our residents, patients and clients to experience a God with "skin on," to each of these and all, we respond as a ministry with an act of faith, "Amen."

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NOTES

1. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.
2. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*.
3. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963, 61.
4. "Teresa of Ávila Quotes," Goodreads, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/74226.Teresa_of_vila.
5. International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1983), 146-49.
6. "Apostles' Creed," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/prayers/apostles-creed>.

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