

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

By QUENTIN QUESNELL

THE abiding presence of Christ in our midst is presented under two main forms in the New Testament. First, there is the fact of the eucharistic presence, known to us also from dogmatic definition. Jesus said, 'This is my body';¹ it is almost another way of saying the same thing to affirm that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is present in the sacrament of the altar.

There is another presence of Jesus, more appreciated in recent years than it had been in the last few centuries, which is equally well grounded in the New Testament texts. If mere counting of texts were a satisfactory method of exegesis, one would call it even better founded than the first, for the vast majority of the 'presence' texts refer to it. They tell us that Christ is with us always, even to the consummation of the world.² Where two or three are gathered together in his name, there is he in the midst of them.³ Who receives his preachers receives him.⁴ We are all members of his one body.⁵ Christ in us is our hope of glory.⁶ He does not leave us orphans, but comes to us,⁷ makes his abode with us,⁸ dwells in our hearts through faith.⁹ In the midst of the New Jerusalem, his Church, he, the Lamb, is always found,¹⁰ etc.

In traditional Catholic exegesis, these texts all refer to a presence beyond the sacramental, a spiritual presence, a 'mystical' presence: the identification of Christ with the individual christian and with the body of the Church. They refer to a real presence of Christ as companion, friend, guide, teacher to the individual and to the social group of christians. This century's interest in the bible, in the liturgy, in patristics, and in a piety with deep dogmatic roots in all of these, has led to a greater appreciation in our own day of this other, this spiritual, mystical presence. With this appreciation has come a new and stronger link with some of the best elements in an abiding Christian tradition, familiar already from such classic texts as the *Imitation of Christ*.¹¹

¹ Lk 22, 19.

² Mt 28, 20.

³ Mt 18, 20.

⁴ Mt 25, 40.

⁵ Cor 12, 27.

⁶ Col 1, 27.

⁷ Jn 14, 18.

⁸ Jn 14, 23.

⁹ Eph 3, 17.

¹⁰ Apoc 21, 22-23.

¹¹ Cf. Book II, cc. 1, 8.

At the same time, the consistent attempt to live this doctrine out in practice, to build a daily spiritual life around it, can lead to some difficulties. For example, there is the problem of how in practice the different presences actually fit together. If one takes seriously the scriptural and traditional truth about the continual presence of Christ with the christian, what is the place of the eucharistic presence in our spiritual life? Very simply, very practically stated, the question comes down to this: If I can talk to Jesus in my heart or at my side at all hours of the day and night, why should I stop to visit him in the blessed Sacrament in a church? Perhaps even: Why should I receive him – or at least, what happens when I do receive him – in holy communion?

The question is naive. A child who had grown up in the reality of the constant presence of Jesus might ask it when first brought into contact with the Eucharist. But naive questions bring us most quickly of all to the heart of deep truths. Let us take the question seriously and try to re-think the 'presence' doctrine in the light of its immediate source in the New Testament.

First of all, some try to answer it by dismissing the non-sacramental presences as symbolic, figurative, imaginary. But this seems in flat contradiction with the direct statements of the New Testament, statements at least as direct and formal as those used of the Eucharist itself. Again, how can this answer be reconciled with the long practical testimony of tradition which we touched on above? And does it not moreover contradict the general teaching of theologians about sanctifying grace? They have always insisted on the reality of Christ's presence in all souls in the state of grace. The conscious perception of this presence may be a mystical gift not necessarily granted to all, but the underlying reality itself, and the deliberate active cultivation of a prayerful attention to that reality is not mysticism nor imagination, but christianity.

A second answer is to point out that we are simply dealing with two different kinds of presence. In the christian heart, Christ is present only as God; in the Eucharist, he is present also as man. This is true; but it is an inadequate answer for several reasons. To begin with, the problem under discussion is a problem of psychological attitude, of how to reconcile two realities in day-to-day conscious living; whereas the proposed solution is not on a psychological but on a purely speculative level. Our question was a practical one: If Jesus is present here and now in my heart, and if I can talk to him, pray to him, feel close to him, receive his help and advice, contem-

plate him and imitate his example, what more do I gain by going to visit him in a church? What more can be had? How will that bring the two of us closer?

Presence, though it escapes our categories of definition, at least psychologically and experientially centres around a person. We can distinguish between the real and the imaginary presence of the same person. But if a person is once really present – can be seriously ‘talked to’, ‘felt near’ – then it is hard to see or in practice to experience what that person’s becoming present ‘also in another way’ can add.

This is precisely the case with the mystical Jesus. He is really present and can be experienced as such. He is a person, a person we know and know well. ‘As God’ and ‘as man’ are, in scholastic terminology, real but incomplete distinctions; but presence has to do with person, and the person in both cases is the same. If it is the same person who is in my heart and in the tabernacle, then the fact that in the church he is present also as man does not really answer the psychological problem.

Moreover it is not perfectly exact to say that the mystical presence is a presence simply ‘as God’. It is the presence of that Jesus into whom we are incorporated and with whom we are mystically identified. The evening before he dies, our Lord speaks of that presence, saying simply, ‘I will come’. That ‘I’ is the key word. He spoke it without distinctions to the group who had come to know him most intimately as a man who was one with the Father: incarnate Word.

A third proposed solution is more satisfying psychologically. It points to the ‘concreteness’ of the Eucharistic presence. In the church our Lord is localized. I know he is there in the tabernacle; I can fix my gaze on the golden door and in solemn Exposition on the host itself. Not that psychologically the body adds presence to the personality; but that the body enables us to fix the presence in time and space. When we can point, touch, look at, localize in space and define in time, we feel – creatures of flesh that we are – that we possess more fully.

But here the theologians step in to challenge our apparent advantage and gain. The eucharistic body of Christ is not in space in the ordinary sense of the word: it is not moved from one place to another when the priest moves the eucharistic species; it is not touched when the host is touched, not broken or separated when the hosts are separated or broken. The body of Christ is not looked at etc., in the Eucharist. The object of our looking, touching, moving, localizing,

are precisely the sensible appearances. 'According to the natural mode of existence, our Saviour is always at the right hand of the Father', says the Council of Trent. His sacramental presence does not fit the normal human categories of space and time; in spite of the fact that this is his body, truly present.

But then, to return to our question, what is left? What has the eucharistic presence of Christ to offer us distinctively its own? Why did Christ institute this eucharistic presence at all?

Let us turn to the account of the inauguration of the sacrament, the gospel account of the last supper.

And when the time came, he took his place, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, 'With yearning have I yearned to eat this pasch with you before my suffering; for I say to you that no more at all am I to eat of it until it has been fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'

And taking a cup, giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, not at all will I drink from now on of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'¹

Here our Lord announces that this is his last meal with his apostles; that he is about to suffer and, as he has foretold earlier in the same gospel, suffer unto death.² These verses also tell us that he had eagerly looked forward to this last pasch with them, and that the kingdom of God in a new and fuller sense was now really at hand, beginning with his suffering.

There follows the actual, solemn, traditional christian ceremony, performed here for the first time:

And taking bread, blessing, he broke, and gave to them saying, 'This is my body, given up for your sake. Do this for my remembering'.

And the cup, in just the same way, after having eaten, saying 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for your sake'.³

What is the point of this ceremony which he asks to be repeated in remembrance of him? What is Jesus doing? Many answers are possible. He is eating a meal. He is saying goodbye to his friends.

¹ Lk 22, 14-18.

² Cf. Lk 9, 22; 9, 31; 9, 44; 13, 33; 18, 31-33.

³ Lk 22, 19-20.

These answers are true, but they are obviously insufficient and inadequate. Yet even as we search for a better answer, we must bear in mind that answers always depend upon questions, and that inadequate questions on our part will lead only to further inadequate answers.

'Was Jesus instituting a ceremony of remembrance?', a reform theologian might ask. The answer is undoubtedly, Yes, he was; for the words are clear: 'Do this for my remembrance.' But Jesus instituted at the last supper something more: a ceremony of remembrance which also involved changing bread and wine into his body and blood. We must continue to ask questions.

If we ask: Did Jesus really change bread and wine into his own body and blood?, the answer is undoubtedly, Yes, he did. For the words are clear: 'This is my body'. Perhaps there are further questions to be asked. It is possible that Jesus changed bread and wine into his body and blood in such a way that he did something more.

Catholic tradition says that he did: that Jesus at the last supper offered a sacrifice. The full answer to the question, What is Jesus doing?, is not merely, 'instituting a ceremony of remembrance', not merely 'changing bread and wine into his body and blood', but (and this is an answer which includes the other two) 'Jesus is offering a sacrifice'.

Catholic tradition and the New Testament specify what sacrifice Jesus offered at the last supper. It is the same sacrifice he was going to offer on the cross the next day, the same sacrifice which is offered at every altar in the world since then, the one and only sacrifice which exists in the new law – the sacrifice of the cross, his offering of himself as redemption for the sins of the world.

What is there in the words which indicates this truth? First, the context: 'with yearning have I yearned to perform this paschal rite with you before I suffer' – I who, as the Christ, must suffer and so enter into my glory.¹ This is the sacrifice which establishes the kingdom of God. And so I go to it willingly. See how willingly: I now enact before your eyes in symbolic fashion what will happen to me tomorrow. I take bread, break it, and say, This is my body, given for your sake. This cup is the new God-man treaty, sealed in my blood, poured out for your sake.

Body and blood, separate before their eyes – sign of death. Body broken, blood poured out – sign of death and suffering. And why

¹ Lk 24, 26.

this mystic act? Why such symbolism? Was it merely to show that he foresaw what would happen? Merely a prophecy, like Ezechiel's lying on his side,¹ Jeremiah's waistcloth,² Hosea's marriage?³ No, not just a prophecy. For he handed them the bread. 'Take and eat'. He gave them the cup. 'Take it. Drink it'. They were to share, to take their part in, what he was about to accomplish.

They would remember: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you'.⁴ 'My flesh is real food; my blood is real drink.' 'Who eats of me, that man will live by me.'⁵ They would interpret their eating in the light of the Jewish tradition in which they had been raised: 'those who eat that which is offered are sharers in the sacrifice'.⁶ This theme is elaborated in the last discourse, where Christ's prayer 'that where I am you also may be'⁷ is finally shown to mean: as I, suffering, dying, crucified, so you, persecuted, hated, martyred for my sake, will bring forth fruit unto eternal life.⁸ So St. Paul, when he repeats the Lord's phrase 'Do this in remembrance of me,' adds: 'As often as you shall do this, you will recall the suffering of the Lord until he come'.⁹

We are at the heart of the christian message. Jesus offers a sacrifice, himself, for the whole world, willingly taking upon himself undeserved suffering and finally death; he, the sinless, the pure. He does it willingly because the Father wills it and because we have need of it – that is, he acts out of obedience and love. This is the sacrifice of the cross.

But the night before he suffers, he preaches what he is doing effectively in a series of symbolic actions. In those actions and in the accompanying words he shows that he is accepting his suffering and death out of obedience and love. Here, at the supper, he makes willing offering of himself as victim, as sacrifice. And that self-offering he will carry through the next day on the cross. At the supper he offers, without any physical shedding of blood, the internal acts of obedience and love which in the last analysis give any sacrifice its meaning and value, and the external symbolic action. And there is one thing more.

If he had done no more than lay before the apostles bread and wine as symbols of his own separated body and blood; if he had asked his followers to eat and drink as symbolic actions showing

¹ Ezek 4.

² Jer 13.

³ Hos 1 and 3.

⁴ Jn 6, 53.

⁵ Jn 6, 55-56.

⁶ 1 Cor 10, 18.

⁷ Jn 14, 3.

⁸ Jn 15, 18-16, 33.

⁹ 1 Cor 11, 23-26.

forth their own acceptance of a personal share in the perfect sacrifice and offering, a share which they would live out in their own lives and deaths, that would have been a wonderful and beautiful ceremony indeed. It would have been in later christian times a commemoration of what Jesus did on the cross and a regularly repeated stimulus and encouragement to all to imitate his example.

But Jesus would do more. The objects he used to make his passion present would not be bread and wine, standing for his flesh and his blood, but his real flesh and blood, under the appearances of bread and wine. The symbolic action would be performed with objects which were real. His followers would share in his will and act of sacrifice, in his perfect self-offering, by actually eating the real victim of the sacrifice: not bread and wine to remind us of his body and his blood, but his very body and blood, made present in a way which would remind us of his passion and his death.

It is not false to say that Jesus changed bread and wine into his body and blood in order that he might always remain with us under these sensible appearances. But it is more true to say, as the Council of Trent teaches,¹ that he changed bread and wine into his body and blood so that we, through the repetition with our own hands and hearts and voices of the full offering of his sacrifice, might join him on Calvary; that we might, by our use of the bread and wine, come to be with him, doing what he did.

Everything about this sacrament is ordered to sacrifice. Not a single statement in the New Testament refers to it under any other sign but that of sacrifice: his offering and our share in it. But in the full christian story sacrifice does not stand alone either; it is in no sense the end of the road. Sacrifice is redemption, which means resurrection and glory.² This sacrifice makes us one with Jesus in the complete redemptive mystery, gives us the presence of the now glorified Lord, and fuses us with one another in love into the one body of Christ.

Eucharist is sacrament and sacrifice both, but sacrament ordered to sacrifice or to our participation in sacrifice. Every mass is a doing **this** in commemoration of him, a carrying out of his command. Every mass is our attempt, in him, to share perfectly his sacrifice. Every offering of the mass is an expression of our continual striving to share more and more fully, to put on the sacrificial mind which is in Christ Jesus; every communion an attempt to approach more and

¹ Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Ed. 32) 938.

² Jn 12, 23; Phil 2, 8-9.

more closely the perfection of this sacrifice, a sacrifice possible and effective for us only with and in the Church. And to this end, he is really present, really comes to us, gives us his body and blood to eat and drink: not so much to be with us as to bring us to himself.

What then is the meaning of the Church's keeping the consecrated species in the tabernacle for our reverence, adoration and visits? The custom began, we know, with keeping them to make possible communion outside mass, communion of the sick, the dying, etc. This gives the clue. The sacrament is preserved in order to widen possible participation, active participation, in the sacrifice of the mass. This has reference, first, to those who were not present at the mass offered that day. They can, under the proper conditions, by receiving the body of Christ, presented as victim in that mass, have their share in that same sacrifice.

Secondly, the species are also for those who have no occasion to receive them in communion. For them too, the species have a meaning and a use which is still primarily sacrificial. Jesus is there in the sacrament as a result of the words of the sacrifice, the words which in the mass symbolically separated body and blood, thus re-presenting his offering of himself on the cross to our sight and our hearing. He is there in the sacrament because the Church has continued to make his sacrifice her own, because she renewed it and declared her allegiance to it this morning, as every morning. Christ is here because the sacrificial sign of the cross still dominates and characterizes the Church. He is here in his glorified body because through his holy cross he has redeemed the world, and the peculiar union of cross-resurrection, suffering-triumph and glory is here vivid in him. He is here in the Church as the crucified and risen Saviour, that we may be reminded of what it means to be saved and to be saved in him: that is, to take up our cross with him so that through him we may enter into glory.

A visit to him, then, in the blessed Sacrament will be a vivid remembrance of the Mass which we or the Church in the name of us all has offered that day. It will be our renewed acceptance of the way of salvation which is the cross. And it will be a looking forward to, an excellent preparation for, the Mass of the morrow.

We spoke above of the concreteness of the sacramental species, of how they appeal to our senses and imagination. Through them he who was Saviour through his cross and resurrection can be approached under a form which proclaims him simultaneously as sacrificed and glorified, one which makes it more easy for us to remember

the full christian message of salvation, as always summed up in him.

Hence, our approach to him in the blessed Sacrament will not dare take as its aim the mere enjoyment of his physical presence any more than one could have rested content with that in the days when he walked on earth. Who approaches Jesus now as then receives from him a sacrificial challenge: 'Today, tomorrow, every day, I am sacrificed. Are you? I am here to be eaten and to transform the eater into myself. Are you ready to let yourself be transformed?'

To return then to our question: What precisely does this presence in the Eucharist add to the other presences mentioned in the New Testament? Most properly speaking, it does not add to them. It leads to them. It is not a goal; it is a means. The presence of Christ in the heart, in the life, is an end of christian living. Paul speaks of this goal, for example, when he speaks of our growing up in Christ¹, of his labouring till Christ be formed in us², till we put on perfectly the man within,³ that Christ may dwell by faith in our hearts. For Christ in us is our hope of glory.

Even those saints who have centred their whole lives around the contemplation of the sacrament of the altar, living, even physically, as near as possible to their sacramental Lord, did so ultimately not just to be with him, but in order, by being with him, to grow in grace and to increase his life within them.

Our original question, then, was poorly phrased. We should not have asked: If Christ is present in the christian heart, why should he also add a presence in the tabernacle? For the truth is that Christ is present in the christian heart according to the degree of our love of him and likeness to him. In order to make easier the increase of that love and likeness in us, Christ has made himself present also in the tabernacle. Our visits, our other eucharistic devotions, remind us at all times that Jesus is Saviour, remind us of his sacrifice and of his glory, and of his call to us to take our share in both.

Christ is present in my heart because I am a believing christian in the state of grace. His growth in me, his love and life in me is my christian life. This growth means that I come to share more and more perfectly his own dispositions towards God and man. These dispositions are most perfectly summed up on the cross. The perfect sharing of them in the trials of my own life results in my resurrection and glorification. Here is the constant striving of my christian living, its tone and direction.

¹ Eph 4, 13.

² Gal 4, 19.

³ Eph 3, 16.

I achieve this growth not primarily as an individual, but as a member of the whole body of Christ on earth, the Church. The whole Church together is constantly achieving this same growth towards the fulness of Christ.¹ This growing up into Christ is experienced most intensely when the Church, united in her cult, solemnly enters into the Christ-experience, goes through the death-resurrection ritual, repeats with him his sacrifice, offers the Mass. I take my place in that. With the Church I too offer as a symbolic re-enactment of his suffering and death the real body and blood which he makes present to us all in that great act. As symbol of my full participation in the sacrifice and as a means to that participation (for these signs work what they signify) I eat his flesh and blood. And according to the measure of my deliberate participation, I grow in him, in his grace. His presence to me and to others through me in all my daily living becomes more intense, real, perceptible, effective.

After the sacrifice there is kept in the church his sacramental body, which was made present to effect the sacrifice and to make possible our sharing in it. It is kept in the church to make the all-day-long sharing of that sacrifice easier for people who will come to the church or will think of his presence there or will receive that body at some other time of day apart from Mass.

And to all those who approach to share in the sacrifice, the glorified Jesus in the tabernacle repeats the full gospel message that our future eternal glorified life will come to us in the measure in which we share with him in the dispositions of his passion. His glorified body, present here for us, pledges that eternal glory to our own flesh.

And, finally, by the very way he has chosen to perpetuate this sacrifice in our midst, he proclaims that other truth, so much at the heart of christianity, that we are all in this together; that salvation is a community affair. I eat of him, so does my neighbour; both of the one Christ. I strive in the eating to be closer, to be one with him; so does my neighbour, so does the entire Church. I say yes, *Amen*, to his way of salvation, so does my neighbour; we say it in the Church. We are given the occasion to do so and the ability to do so because of the Church. Communion is communion not only with the glorified Jesus, but, like all true contact with Jesus, with the whole of his mystical body, with all the Church. It was to the Church that he made his promise: 'I am with you always.'

¹ Cf. Eph 4, 15-16.