

THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU WORSHIP OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST, PART 2

“Moses did exactly as the Lord had commanded him. On the first day of the first month of the second year the Dwelling was erected...He took the commandments and put them in the ark; he placed poles alongside the ark and set the propitiatory upon it. He brought the ark into the Dwelling and hung the curtain veil, thus screening off the ark of the commandments, as the Lord had commanded...Then the cloud covered the meeting tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling” (Exodus 40:16-17, 20-21, 34).

Last week I began an extended reflection on the Eucharist and our faith in Christ’s real presence for us in and through that most central of sacraments. This week we continue our reflection by examining the ways that we encounter Christ in the Eucharist: in the celebration of the Mass, and in Holy Communion and worship of the Eucharist outside of Mass. The celebration of the Mass, especially with the reception of Holy Communion, is our most perfect participation in the saving mystery of Christ’s presence with us in the Eucharist. It is the work of the gathered community, in union with the whole Body of Christ, the Church, by which we follow the command of Christ our head to do this memory of him and through which he becomes present for us in his Body and Blood on the altar. By our celebration, not only does Christ become present on the altar, he comes to us in our celebration of his word in Scripture, in the service of the priest or bishop who act in Christ’s name, and in the gathered community, whom he forms as one, building up the communion of our parish, the Church, and the whole world.

While our celebration of the Mass is our most perfect participation in the Eucharist, our participation doesn’t end there, nor is it limited to the Mass. At the conclusion of each Mass we place any remaining consecrated hosts, now called the Blessed Sacrament, in the ornate cabinet at the center of the high altar that we call the tabernacle. This cabinet is modeled after the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, because it was there that God’s sacramental presence among the first People of God resided and it is in the tabernacle that he dwells among his newly constituted people today. The practice of retaining the Blessed Sacrament after Mass stretches back to the earliest days of Christianity when people would take the sacrament from Mass to share it with those who could not be there, such as the sick and the imprisoned, a practice which we still continue. In some communities it was also taken home and eaten throughout the week, beginning the practice of daily Communion. Thus our belief in the enduring presence of Christ in the Eucharist even beyond the Mass has deep roots that stretch back to the first generations of Christians.

We mark Christ’s enduring presence in the Eucharist by the special reverence we show the reserved Blessed Sacrament, genuflecting to it when we enter and leave the church, keeping a candle, called the sanctuary lamp, perpetually lit nearby it, and spending time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, either within the tabernacle or removed from the tabernacle and exposed for personal and communal adoration. We will examine this final, special expression of our faith in Christ’s ongoing presence in the Eucharist next week in the next installment of THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU.