

As we approach the manger, remember God is with us



Thirty-three years ago, on the night before the First Sunday in Advent 1986, I came home to the Catholic Church. Technically, that makes me a “revert,” but describing myself as one seems overly dramatic, since I had been physically absent from the Church for only four weeks. There are more than a few able-bodied Catholics who consider themselves practicing if they make it to Mass once a month.

But for me, those four weeks toward the end of my first term at Michigan State had been rough. I was lost, and I knew it.

That Saturday night, I needed to clear my head. So I set out on the three-mile walk up Michigan Avenue from my dorm to the state capitol building.

It was a miserable night. With the temperature hovering near freezing, the steady sleet never quite turned into snow. Walking into the wind, I found my glasses quickly coated with ice. The thought of abandoning the completely irrational goal of walking six miles round trip, however, seemed worse than going on.

I made it to the capitol and headed back, still despondent. The wind on my back felt even colder than it had on my face. A mile and a half later, a soft yellow light shimmered on the slushy sidewalk in front of me. Wet to the bone, my body craving warmth, I tried the door of the Church of the Resurrection and found it open.

The church was silent, but from the entryway, I could see that the sanctuary was brightly lit. Deciding to sit for a few minutes while I warmed up, I headed to the first pew in the back.

And when I reached it, without thinking about what I was doing, I genuflected.

In the 18 years of my life, I had performed that same action more times than I could count. But in that moment, right knee on the floor, right hand to my forehead as I began to make the Sign of the Cross, I suddenly knew I was in the presence of what I had been missing.

Or, rather, whom.

Transubstantiation is a doctrine, a theological explanation of a reality experienced by Christians long before Thomas Aquinas put it in terms derived from Aristotle. The Real Presence is that reality. Scripture and Tradition both reveal Christ, but the Eucharist makes him as present to us as my wife and children are to me.

Sometimes, though, distracted by my thoughts or by my phone, I lose sight of the people around me. That doesn't mean that they're not there; it means I'm the one who's lost. I see them again when I come back to myself – or perhaps it's more correct to say that I come back to myself when I see them again. The little rituals of life – saying good morning to our coworkers, sitting down with our family for dinner – remind us daily that no man is an island.

Intellectually, I had never stopped believing in transubstantiation, but at some point before my freshman year of college, I had stopped experiencing the Real Presence of Christ. In the midst of that genuflection, the experience of younger days flooded back, and I felt once again the joy and peace of knowing that Christ was present before me.

Of course, he had always been there, patiently waiting; I was the one who was lost. In the unconscious repetition of an act my parents had taught me as a child, I had found him – or, rather, he had called out to me.

Over the last several months, I have used this space to talk about our need of ritual and liturgy; of surrounding ourselves and our families with the symbols of our faith; of recognizing that faith is a gift, but one that can wither on the vine unless we feed it through the sacraments and our imagination.

Now you know why.

This is the reality of our faith: God is with us, but we must approach the manger and the Cross and the tabernacle with eyes prepared to see.

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