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Christ's Presence in the Liturgy

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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Christ's Presence in the Liturgy

**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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Third Sunday of Easter

Sunday Readings for April 22, 2012 for Cycle B:

Acts 3:13-19; Ps 4; 1 Jn 2:1-15; Lk 24:35-48

CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THE LITURGY

Lawrence E. Frizzell

If a friend asked you about the origins and meaning of our Sunday worship, what would you answer? Would you trace the two parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Sacrifice-Sacrament, to the work of Jesus? No explanation would be complete without a description of how Jesus and the early Church drew upon the Jewish liturgy. Already the synagogue service had developed a three-year cycle of readings from the five books of Moses and the message of the prophets. The Temple sacrifices, the Passover and other meals provided rituals for experiencing God's presence in the daily life of the chosen people.

In the accounts of the risen Lord manifesting himself among his disciples, the favored context is a meal. St. Luke recorded a touching episode of disillusioned disciples explaining the tragedy that befell Jesus of Nazareth to one who seemed to be a pilgrim on the road to Emmaus, a town near Jerusalem (24:13-35). They had not believed the report of the women about angels who declared that he was alive. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). Still obtuse, the disciples had the generosity to invite the stranger for the evening meal. Suddenly, the guest became the host: "He took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them; their eyes were opened and they recognized him..." (24:30-31).

Did Jesus transform this simple meal into the first Eucharist after his resurrection? We cannot be certain. Even if this were only an ordinary meal, Luke wanted his readers to learn that the Word and Sacrament complete each other in bearing witness to the risen Christ's presence in the Church.

He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister... but especially in the Eucharistic species... He is present in his Word since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church (Vatican II, *Sacred Liturgy* #7).

This Sunday's text from the Gospel of Luke follows the Emmaus passage. Jesus came to the Eleven and upbraided them for their lack of faith. He showed them that indeed he was the same Master they had known. Then, after eating, he repeated what he had taught them during his ministry: "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44). Here Jesus referred to the three parts of the Jewish Scriptures; in the synagogue the prophets and the writings (the first of which is the Psalter) were used to bear supportive witness to the Torah of Moses. The Gospel emphasized that all three pointed to the Paschal Mystery. "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:46-47).

The speech of Peter (Acts 3:12-26), presented in part as the first reading, noted the central place of Jesus in the ministry of healing and forgiveness carried out by the Apostles. These benefits to humanity must be rooted in the Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus as the work of the God coming from Abraham. Both Jewish and Roman authorities were guilty of a miscarriage of justice in the persecution of Jesus. This and so many cases of such misuse of authority throughout history constitute a somber lesson to all political leaders and those in the executive branch of the world's systems of administering justice. However, Peter explained that ignorance excused them from full responsibility in killing the Author of Life. As Lord of history, God can draw good even from the tragedies resulting from human sin. "God has thus brought to fulfillment what he announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer" (3:18).

The record of history may indeed seem bleak if we catalogue all of the injustices and other crimes known to us, but the Gospel message provides hope, rooted not merely in human potential for improvement but in divine mercy. "Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away and that the Lord may grant you times of refreshment and send you the Christ..." (3:19-20). Here St. Peter has stressed the human response to God's gift in an act of repentance. In the first letter of St. John, the prior gift of forgiveness is shown to be the continuing work of the risen Christ. "If any one sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world" (2:1-2). Present with us in Word and Sacrament, Christ is moreover the High Priest interceding for all humanity before the heavenly Father. This faith in Christ is the basis for our hope that God the Father will have the last Word in human history!