

Recently, two nuns from a Spanish order visited the parish hall. They were interested in seeing if the site might be a good fit for a school that they were starting for youth in the area. As we viewed the property, they began talking about their needs and how the space could function. One of the distinct needs was a chapel. Where would it go? Which room could be utilized and transformed into this holy space? “Why don’t you use our sanctuary?” I offered. They looked at me with a slight puzzlement. “Well,” they said, “we need a tabernacle. You don’t have a tabernacle, do you?” I asked, “You mean a place for the reserve sacrament, right?” Yes. Yes, that was it.

As we made our way into the entryway of the church, I motioned to the sisters toward the golden tabernacle in the image of the steeple that rested to the left of the altar. Their eyes widened with wonder. One even declared that she was getting an education about other traditions. She had no idea that this would exist. I joked that we had a good model to develop from. What followed, however, was very instructive.

Upon seeing the tabernacle for the reserve sacrament, the two nuns immediately wanted to enter the sanctuary. We opened the door, the two walked into the space, genuflected, sat in chairs opposite the tabernacle, and began to pray. It was one of the clearest expressions I had seen recently of the power of the Eucharist, and, particularly, the piety of these nuns to see in that sacrament the very real presence of Jesus in the world. Watching from behind the glass doors, it appeared that, for all intents and purposes, Jesus was in the midst of the room. Needless to say, I was impressed and felt a little twinge of envy that they could see so clearly and unequivocally the reality of Christ in the world.

Which is, in effect, the challenge and the work that we are about as Christians in the world. Where do we see Jesus? How do we see the Christ among us? Where? When? Hopefully, we recognize that presence in the very intimate and powerful exchange of bread and wine and words of promise, “given in love for you,” that are a part of communion. Yet, where else do we encounter the risen Christ?

Perhaps, this can be one of the Lenten exercises that you undertake this year. Throughout the forty days that we will embark upon next Wednesday attune your attention to the world around you and look for Jesus, look for Christ in the very real and mundane and fleeting moments that comprise our life. I suspect that if you do this, you will be surprised. Indeed, if the gospels are any proof, there will be plenty of surprises, and Jesus will be meeting us in places we least expect it. So keep your eyes and ears open. Better yet, keep your very being open to witnessing the presence of the holy in the midst of the world around us.

This, in part, is what Peter Rollins expresses well in the video below. His argument is that religion doesn’t take us out of this world and free us from the difficulties and wonders of life. Rather, religion moves us more deeply into the world, because it is in the very world that we inhabit that the holy one meets us. In certain instances, I think that this is readily recognizable. We are moved by the beauty of creation. We are cognizant of the blessing of a moment of silence and peace. We can see the Christ reality in the other—the partner, the friend, and the stranger—who allows us to be more fully who we are to be. We get that.

What may be a bit more difficult is to see Christ in the fullness of the world and in the complexity that meets us there. Particularly, it is difficult to digest this witness when it comes to us in the guise of what we struggle with. I don't think it is hard for us to understand "seeing" Christ in those instances and people. We get that too. What is hard is the next step. How do we respond toward the other if we believe Christ to be present there? In this time of upheaval as travel bans and deportation and transgender rights are bandied about, I don't think that the command to see Christ in the other easily answers the large scale issues inherent in them. However, I can't help but think that, while we would struggle with particulars regarding these large issues, we would not be so crass and so mean in our policy if we recognized Christ in the other. Indeed, if we possessed an ounce of the reverence of the two nuns praying before the reserve sacrament, we could not be.

Which is a good thing. Not always easy. And certainly not always easy to enact. But we are on a journey, and we have not arrived yet. The journey is the thing that allows us the opportunity to grow, to change, and to, hopefully, move more deeply into this world that God has given us and to love this world. For that is where God resides. Blessings on your Lenten journeys.