

A Face in the Crowd

Imagine you are walking along a busy street. You are minding your own business. The people passing by are no more than unfamiliar faces to you—not bad or threatening, just people. Ordinary people. No one special.



Suddenly you see someone you know. More than that, you see someone you love and are truly happy to see: a long-lost friend, a grown-up son or daughter, a dear family member, someone you never thought you'd run into on this day or in this place. Your face lights up. You call out or wave. There's a happy moment of recognition, smiles, hugs. Hands are clasped or backs are slapped. "Hey, it's great to see you!"

All sorts of people have walked by without you noticing or pausing. But when you see someone you care about, that person's face "stands out in the crowd." He or she shines for you, in the light of love. We use expressions like "she lit up" or "he was beaming" to describe the happiness we feel in such an encounter.

THE SHINING GAZE OF LOVE

Now imagine how God the Father, the first Person of the Blessed Trinity, "sees" his incarnate Son. The love between the Father and the Son is ultimately beyond human imagining, of course, but we can try. Consider this analogy. If your own heart is awakened by a surprise encounter with a beloved friend or family member whom you chance to meet on the street, think how much more must God's love be "heartfelt" and "full" when he beholds his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. How much more must the Son shine in the eyes of his Father? How much more does God "light up" when he sees his own Son?

So far, so good. But what does this have to do with us? What does this have to do with Eucharist? Simply this: that same brilliance, that shining gaze of love, is what God lavishes on us as we worship him in the liturgy. Why? Because God recognizes his Son in us.

CHRIST PRESENT IN THE ASSEMBLY OF HIS PEOPLE

The bishops of the world, gathered at the Second Vatican Council, solemnly affirmed in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (article 7) that Christ is present in the assembly of his people. His presence in them, as they pray and sing, is real.

What does it mean that Christ is present in the assembly? It does not mean that we lose our individuality, or that we are preoccupied with ourselves, or that we do not acknowledge our sins and weaknesses. But it does mean that when God sees us at prayer, he sees his own Beloved Son, despite our faults and failings. He sees what is best in our humanness. God is not neutral toward us when we worship him. He is moved by the greatest love.

THE TRINITY AND THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Our worship is Trinitarian. Because we have been baptized into Christ, we have the immense gift of sharing in that relationship of love that exists between the Father and the

Son. We can share in the prayer of Jesus to his Father in heaven. We also share in their Spirit of love, who sealed us in the Sacrament of Confirmation and who strengthens us for mission. To understand the true implications of Jesus' presence in the assembly, we must remember this Trinitarian quality of worship.

ON THE CORNER OF 4TH AND WALNUT

The spiritual writer and monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) once described an epiphany—a manifestation of God—that happened as he was walking along the street in Louisville, Kentucky. He was on the corner of 4th and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, when suddenly he was overwhelmed with love for all the people around him.

He was filled with a sense of having awakened from a dream of being separate from others, to the truth of being one with them. He saw the glory of God's Son transfigure all the people around him. Here's what he wrote:

"It is a glorious destiny to be part of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! ... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Think about it. The people in the pew, no matter their idiosyncrasies, are the people in whom Christ is present—the woman wearing unfashionable clothes, the man singing off-key, the restless teenager, the cranky elder—every one of them. Christ is present in them as they become the assembly at worship. God looks on them with love. If only we could see ourselves as God sees us!

REFLECT

To recognize the presence of Christ in the assembly means accepting certain differences—differences of culture, race, language, income, style, etc. What differences do you find most challenging to accept in your neighbor? Can you learn to see the face of God's Beloved Son in someone very different from you?

ACT

When you exchange the Sign of Peace at Sunday Mass, meet the eyes of the other person, however briefly, with respect and affection. Carry the same spirit of respect into your everyday interactions, especially toward people who serve you in any way. Sometimes people feel invisible. See them. Treat others as you would like to be treated.

PRAY

Merciful Father, as Abraham trusted you and so received your blessing, help me to trust you in the tests and trials of my life. Jesus Christ, beloved Son of God, let me see your face shining in all those around me at worship. Holy Spirit, help our parish to be what you call us to be. Let our faith shine for all to see. Amen.

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The quotation from Thomas Merton is taken from his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p.141.

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