



The Grace of our Mutual Presence in Christ: Encounter, Accompaniment, and Mission
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Introduction

The words, “*This is my body given for you,*” invite us to reflect and prayerfully enter the sacrament of the Eucharist in our lives. As Catholics, we recognize in these words the generous gift God, the Father, offers us in His Son, Jesus. Likewise, with grateful hearts, we can affirm in the Spirit the immensity of Jesus’ sacrificial and life-giving love for us. “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst...For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day” (John 6:35, 40).

Today, we are among those who come to the Lord, believe in Him, and see His loving presence in the Spirit of truth and life in our communities (John 14:16-17). Furthermore, it is in the Spirit that we discern the paths to follow as we seek to emulate the sacrificial and life-giving presence of Christ. As John the Evangelist reminds us, Christ’s loving presence in the Spirit is never far from us, guiding our steps in mutual encounter, accompaniment, and mission (John 16:13-14).

Towards More Life-Giving Encounters with One Another

I suspect that we each have our favorite quote, gesture, or image of Pope Francis. It is remarkable to see how his reflections have touched our Catholic hearts, and the lives of many others who hold different creeds and ethical convictions. Considering our reflection on life-

giving encounters, Pope Francis' appreciation for a culture of encounter that enlarges our lives gives spiritual meaning and depth to what it means to be with and for others. In his encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis says, "Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others. Even our own knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us: in the first place, our parents, who gave us our life and our name" (*Lumen Fidei*, 38).

Indeed, there is in our world a real thirst and hunger for mutual encounters that can lead us to greater life and bring us closer to the Kingdom of God. It is not difficult for us to recognize a world and society saturated with divisive cultural narratives intent on corroding the fabric of community and mutual communion. In some cases, our brothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors have become the stranger, relegated to the peripheries of our care and concern. Consequently, we find ourselves living in a society and culture that in many and different ways discourages us from reaching across the aisle. It is in this divisive and fragmented reality that our culture of encounter can have a transformative effect, bringing us closer to one another.

The realization that "we come from others and belong to others" provides an alternative vision and starting place to our civic and ecclesial discourses and interactions burdened by individualistic views, positions, and rigid claims lacking respect and civility. More to the point, for the followers of Christ, contempt for the world is not an option. Our Eucharistic identity tells us that we belong together, and our "knowledge and self-awareness" are indeed relational. The presence of Christ that is ours in our daily communion with the Spirit of truth and life must also compel us to go out of ourselves in search of our brothers and sisters whose language, race,

culture, religion, and worldview differ from our own. We know from Jesus' teachings and encounters with others how essential this labor of love in communion is for the building of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician women, for example, shows us how mutual enrichment can take place when we make room for others, by letting go of our cultural prejudices and stereotypes (Mark 7:24-30).

Moreover, in the Beatitudes, Jesus provides transformative paths that open wide our hearts to deeper and meaningful encounters with one another's stories (Matthew 5:1-12). From Jesus, we learn that our common embrace must be imbued with poverty of spirit, gentleness, sacrifice, purity of heart, justice, and peace. It can be uncomfortable to open our hearts to experience new peoples, cultures, attitudes, and behaviors that come our way. However, in faith, we can recognize that encountering others requires us to be intentional and sacrificial. Like Jesus, we must live our Eucharistic identity more fully by giving ourselves away in charity and justice. In addition, while we may not always agree on every issue or fully grasp our shared differences, we must hold on to our belief that encountering one another as brothers and sisters—not as enemies—can provide us with life-giving grace for the journey.

Learning to Walk Together in Mutual Accompaniment and Mission

One of the most enduring images of the Church from the Second Vatican Council is the pastoral image and understanding of the people of God as a "pilgrim Church." In its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, the Council reminds us of our pilgrim identity and

eschatological vocation. Truly, our walk together is never far from Christ's presence in his holy ones, moving us to holiness. "When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the City that is to come and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, perfect holiness" (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

As members of the pilgrim Church, then, we seek to keep our eyes fixed on the things from above (Colossians 3:1-4) by learning to walk closely with Christ and the holy ones, who inspire us to keep on walking, and assist us as we, too, give witness to the truth of the Gospel. For it is "in the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are...more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, [that] God vividly manifests His presence and His face" (*Lumen Gentium*, 50). It is by walking in the footsteps of those that have gone before us, in faith, that our pilgrim identity can find hope and direction. Moreover, even as we look to the future heavenly Church (Acts 3:21), we also orient our gaze and path toward the earthly Church endowed with real goodness, beauty, and holiness in her liturgical and sacramental life (*Lumen Gentium*, 48).

It is in the partaking of the sacramental nourishment and Eucharist spirituality—on the way—that we find genuine communion and community. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), we must learn to practice real and intentional accompaniment that opens us to receive and share the body given up for us. Along the way, the fruit of the earth and the work of our human hands must reflect a genuine sense of accompaniment and a common mission. As such, our human efforts must create spaces for greater inclusion, break open our

stories in tables of vulnerability and trust, and allow the Spirit to surprise us with an abundance of possibilities. In our accompaniment, our eyes must be open to the Lord and our hearts must burn for the mission entrusted to us. “Then they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?’ So, they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem” (Luke 24:31-32).

Likewise, it is at our Sunday sacramental table of accompaniment where the presence of the Risen Christ will open our eyes, anew. In communion, we will see “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted,” and, in that instance, recognize that “these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). Emboldened by this vision of communion in mission, we will go forth in the manner of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in solidarity and service for the common good (*Fratelli Tutti*, 67). No longer strangers to one another but as faith-filled pilgrims, fed by the word and bread of life, we will return to our homes and public spaces, giving ourselves away in the retelling and living of the stories that burn in our hearts and transform our lives. Nothing genuinely human will fail to raise an echo in our hearts.

Conclusion

We conclude with these questions: How can the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) help us build a stronger culture of encounter in our Church and society? What does the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) teach us about accompaniment and communion? How does the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) broaden our sense of communion and mission? Finally, how

can the gifts of encounter and accompaniment form our mission and missionary identity as a pilgrim Church?

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