



A priest holds the Eucharist in this illustration. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Bob Roller)



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The small marble table from a Roman-era home was adorned with carved acanthus leaves and the body of Dionysus. When I saw it in the archaeological museum of Thessaloniki, Greece, I broke down crying, though I had no idea why. Several months later, while giving a [talk for my diocese about Scripture and the Eucharist](#) and discussing these tables, the same thing happened. I choked up, fought back tears, and eventually had to apologize and take a quick break before I could continue talking. What is wrong with me?

I think I've figured it out. I was moved to tears because the ancient polytheists, those whom we often call "pagans," saw God everywhere. God was in every nook and cranny of their lives. God was at the entrance to their homes, in the marketplace, around their hearth, at the gymnasium and at their tables.

These were polytheists, of course, but these are the very people whose conversion made Christianity's growth and success possible. While we might look back on their lives and see them as superstitious or weird, there is a profound beauty and power in their piety.



This marble table with Dionysus on the support is from the first century C.E. (Micah D. Kiel)

The doctrine of the real presence in the Eucharist developed in a world where God was everywhere. My Thessaloniki tears flowed at the realization that today, we don't see God anywhere. The [headline-making statistics](#) about Catholics not believing in the real presence are a symptom, not a root cause. The root cause is a diminished sacramental worldview, a broad malaise in which God increasingly finds no foothold in anything we do.

The most common response in the church in the United States to the perceived lack of belief in the real presence has been to focus on adoration and catechesis. The thinking goes that we can pray and teach our way back to the right path, so people will believe and understand the real presence.

I suspect that many of the reasons Catholics today don't see God's real presence in the Eucharist is because they don't see God's presence anywhere.

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Such activities, obviously, are well and good. But I can't help wondering if they are misguided as an attempt to solve the problem. I suspect that many of the reasons Catholics today don't see God's real presence in the Eucharist is because they don't see God's presence anywhere. All the adoration and catechesis in the world will not help the problem if, deep down, individual believers do not have a vibrant sacramental worldview in which God's is active everywhere.

Rather than focus only on adoration and catechesis, the church would do well to work to inculcate a sacramental worldview, to seek out ways to experience God in all parts of our lives. With this in hand, we will have a better foundation for the special presence of God in the Eucharist.

One way to breathe life into our sacramental worldview would be to think about how to experience God in other people, particularly the poor. The Eucharist is not simply a moment for personal piety and reflection. It should never be only about "me and God." The Eucharist is also about other people. Jesus' own self giving offers a pattern of life and self-denial that the Eucharist should create in our lives.

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No one has expressed this aspect of the Eucharist better than Pope John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*](#):

The Lord unites us with himself through the Eucharist—sacrament and sacrifice—and he unites us with himself and with one another by a bond stronger than any natural union; and thus united, he sends us into the whole world to bear witness, through faith and works, to God's love ... All of us who take part in the Eucharist are called to discover, through this

sacrament, the profound meaning of our actions in the world in favor of development and peace; and to receive from it the strength to commit ourselves ever more generously, following the example of Christ, who in this sacrament lays down his life ...

The Eucharist should take us both inward and outward. We inwardly recognize our own salvation. But if we do not outwardly make manifest concrete self-giving action on behalf of others — what John Paul elsewhere refers to as solidarity — we also show a lack of understanding of the real presence. If our attempts at revival only take us inward, our approach is narrow and not comprehensive of the church's teaching of what the Eucharist means.

In order to see God in the Eucharist, we need to see God everywhere. This is a classic 'both/and' moment. We need adoration and Eucharistic piety. But if that's all we have, we may miss the core problem, which is less about piety and more about a diminished sacramental worldview. Here ancient polytheistic lives can instruct us. Their intuition that God is everywhere highlights how our world looks very different.

If we can't see God at our own tables, in our coming and going, and in the poor and in our neighbor, how will we ever see God in the changed substance of bread and wine?

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