Absence/Presence
by Christine Szczepanowski

Some of you with long memories might recall the 1960s TV show “That Was the Week that Was.” Somewhat of a precursor to “Saturday Night Live,” it was hosted by David Frost and featured political satire. Well, I feel like I’m hosting “This is the Weekend that Wasn’t.” It’s not a satire exactly, more of a paradox or perhaps a parable in that it is casting unexpected light on familiar events.

This was to be a big weekend of connection for me. My best friend from high school and I have been organizing our 50th reunion that was to take place at my house this Saturday. Then on Sunday twenty children were to make their First Holy Communion at Old St. Joseph’s, an event I was also responsible for organizing. Of course, neither celebration is taking place this weekend. Both events will be rescheduled, but it has struck me as ironic that this weekend of coming together, of celebrating common bonds old and new, has turned into one of keeping apart. Instead of drawing close, I’m practicing social distancing. And that has got me thinking—about closeness and distance, presence and absence, and Eucharist.

What is presence? The actual presence of a material object is established through the senses, particularly touch. The difference between someone or something actually being there and your imagining their being there is generally whether you can touch them. Physical touch is a baby’s primary way of connecting with others and the world at large. Babies that are deprived of touch grow up profoundly impaired. Touch is important for adults too. Recently we have seen poignant examples of this when a husband and wife, a mother and child, must press their hands up against two sides of a window instead of touching skin to skin. A few Sundays ago, we heard Thomas asserting he needed to touch Jesus’s wounds to know it was really him. Your eyes can fool you; your ears can fool you, but for most people, touch is a solid indicator of presence.

And yet... As believers, our ultimate reality cannot be physically touched. God is not just ineffable (unable to be described in words) but inaccessible to the senses. This is perhaps the central paradox of our faith: our greatest security, the foundation of our very being, body and soul, is, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “the conviction of things not seen... By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Hebrews 11:1,3).

How have we come to know that? By what means has God’s revelation entered our consciousness? Ultimately, we know through the experience of God’s presence breaking into people’s earthly existence. We read about it in the Bible from Abraham through Moses and the prophets. At the
Council of Nicaea, called in 325 CE to formulate the Church’s creed, bishops passionately (and even physically) wrestled with one another to translate their experiences of the trinitarian God into dogma. Ordinary people down to our day have graced experiences of God as well. One evening last October a group of OSJ parishioners gathered in Barbelin Hall for a story slam in which we shared moments of grace in our lives. It was a moving and uplifting evening. Not everyone related an experience, not everyone has had such an experience (although I think if you reflect on it, you may discover you have without having recognized what it was), but everyone was touched by the stories. Our connection as human beings is such that even hearing the experiences of others can bring us the assurance of faith.

So can the sacraments. Every sacrament is an encounter with Christ. And here is where the rich Catholic understanding of presence is fully realized.

Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. We cannot touch his presence the way we can touch one another, but we can touch and be touched by the bread and the wine, we can touch and be touched by the people with whom we share the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist connects our human need for physical connection with our need for spiritual communion. We are created by God and God so loves His creation that he animates it with His very Spirit, drawing us into it, into His love, and into love of one another.

A group of individuals can be touched and formed by an animating spirit as well. This is what I feel about my class in school. Since it was a small pre-K to grade 12 school (although I didn’t come until 1st grade!), many of us grew up together. It was a Friends school and we were influenced by the Quaker emphasis on the inner light, that of God in each one of us as, well as by the social and intellectual currents of the 60s. Though we are far from having stayed in touch as a group, many of us have a sense of ourselves as a body. In the emails that have gone back and forth over the past year, we picked up the thread of connection from fifty years ago. A number of people got involved in finding those for whom no one had contact information. Even if they don’t choose to participate in the reunion, we wanted their presence to be acknowledged. A surprising number of people expressed the (clearly unrealistic) hope that everyone would come. Here again is that invisible presence that was formed through years of physical contact and shared experiences. I may not know (yet) what my classmates look like now, but I feel connected to them.

Presence has made itself felt in another way these days as I’ve been meeting more people virtually. Virtual presence is not actual presence. It can go a long way toward overcoming the absence of physical presence, as we have been discovering over the past weeks, but it is not full presence. These days I have discovered that although it is an adequate alternative to not meeting people at all, a significant piece is missing. When my grandchildren were very small, they tried to touch me through the computer screen and were confused when their little fingers didn’t connect with mine. I’m clear on what can’t be replicated virtually, but I still feel a certain visceral confusion. Part of the presence we bring to being with one another is picking up on the unconscious communication that occurs through touch, body language, and even subtler emotional cues that don’t come across on the screen. I find it more tiring to meet this way. And it turns out I’m not alone. I recently read that the term “Zoom fatigue” has been coined to describe this feeling. We have to work harder to connect when we’re missing the non-verbal communication. We are
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meant to be more fully present to each other than just exchanging words.

So this weekend I am not sharing Eucharist with young new communicants nor am I gathering with old classmates. Yet I’m finding they are all present to me. Sharing in the formation of the children as they prepare to join our Eucharistic community as well as my own life formation growing up with a core group of peers has created bonds that enable them to be with me when they are physically absent. Closeness and distance, presence and absence are only opposites in the strictly material realm. When the Sprit is alive within a community, the opposites are integrated. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the bonds that unite us with one another is the invisible thread that is made real and present to us in our human relationships. In Eucharist, we come to know Jesus in the breaking and the sharing of the bread. In life, we come to know him in sharing our joys and struggles, striving to be really present to each other as He is present to us.

—CS


In your prayers, please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters, our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital and all those who have asked for our prayers.

Announcements

Sounds of Thanksgiving
Old St. Joseph’s will join churches and houses of worship throughout Pennsylvania that will ring their bells for three minutes at 7:00 PM on Sunday, May 3 to honor and thank all those who put themselves at risk by working on the front lines during this COVID-19 health crisis.

Electronic Giving: Time to Update!
OSJ has upgraded our electronic giving program so that now you can contribute both from your computer and by using your cell phone, whether or not you register as a parishioner. Our new program is called ParishSOFT Giving. Visit the Make A Donation page of our website, oldstjoseph.org, for detailed instructions on starting out with or upgrading to ParishSOFT Giving. Please note: everyone who now uses Online Giving will need to upgrade to ParishSOFT Giving by May 15. Thank you!

Vote by Mail
Catholics approach voting as a civic and moral responsibility. Prepare for the Pennsylvania’s June 2 primary election by signing up to vote safely by mail. Visit www.votespa.com for directions on registering to vote and to request a mail ballot. If you do not have access to the Internet, you can also get a paper application to vote by mail by calling the PA Department of State at 1-877-868-3772.

Requiescat in Pace
Old St Joseph has received word that Father Ed Dougherty SJ died on Wednesday, April 29 as a result of the coronavirus infection. Fr. Dougherty was 79 years old, a Jesuit for over 60 years and a priest for almost 48 years.

During his lifetime as a Jesuit, beyond completing the standard course of studies for a Jesuit, Father Dougherty did graduate studies in Sacred Scripture at The Catholic University of America. Among other assignments, he served at Georgetown Prep, taught theology at St Joseph’s University and in schools in South Africa and ministered for almost eight years here at OSJ. Fr. Dougherty was living at Manresa Hall at St. Joseph’s University and assigned to the ministry of prayer for Church and Society at the time of his death.

While at OSJ, Father Dougherty conducted the preparation program for baptism and baptized innumerable infants into the Church. He officiated at weddings, was a regular celebrant of daily and weekend Masses, visited patients at Pennsylvania Hospital, comforted the dying and passed on the faith in adult education classes.

Because of the constraints imposed by the current pandemic, funeral arrangements will be postponed. A memorial mass for Father Dougherty will be announced as soon as this is practical. In the meantime, we entrust Father Dougherty the Lord whom he served with such faithfulness throughout his life.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him; may his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.
INFORMATION

Pastor
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ (pastor@oldstjoseph.org)

Parochial Vicar
Fr. Francis Hannafey SJ (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org)

In Residence
Br. Robert Carson SJ
Fr. Ed O’Donnell SJ (eodonnell@oldstjoseph.org)

Pastoral Associate
BJ Brown (bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org)

Business Manager
Eric German (germane@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Music
Mark Bani (music@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Offices
(office@oldstjoseph.org)

Religious Education (PREP) Coordinator
Christine Szczepanowski (prep@oldstjoseph.org)

Faith, Food & Friends Director
Deborah Hluchan (faithandfriends@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM
Sunday: 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM

Mass Times
Monday through Saturday: 12:05 PM
Saturday Vigil Mass for Sunday: 5:30 PM
Sunday: 7:30, 9:30, 11:30 AM and 6:30 PM
Holy Days: 12:05 and 7:00 PM

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph’s is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
A priest is available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday from 11:30 AM–12:00 PM or by appointment.

Sacrament of Baptism
If you want to arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
The Sacrament of Anointing (the sacrament of the sick) is offered during the 12:05 PM Mass on the first Saturday of each month. Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(osjpc@oldstjoseph.org)
Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair
Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president
Adult Education
Rita O’Brien and Jeanmarie Zippo
(adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
Joe Casey (parishlife@oldstjoseph.org)
Ignatian Spirituality and Formation
Len Mancini (osjspirituality@oldstjoseph.org)

Women, Faith and Fellowship
Rana McNamara (wff@oldstjoseph.org)

Young Adult Community
(osjyac@gmail.com)

Altar Servers
Maria Ramirez (altarserver@oldstjoseph.org)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
Bill Stewart (EM@oldstjoseph.org)

Hospital Ministry
Luanne Balestrucci (hospiteEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Homebound Ministry
Neal Hébert (homeEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Lectors
Lou Anne Bulik (lectors@oldstjoseph.org)

Ushers
Nikola Szigorich (ushers@oldstjoseph.org)

Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)
For Information ... Call

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