

# Recognizing A Presence

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing our Church today is that so many people have trouble recognizing the living presence of God in their lives. Many theologians have examined this great dilemma in far more eloquent – and authoritative – ways than me, but I will attempt to explain it in my own peanut butter and jelly language.

When I was seven years old, I had my first experience of *recognizing a Presence*. One Saturday night, while my parents were out on “a date,” our teenage babysitter and I watched *The Song of*

*Bernadette*, the classic Hollywood film about the Marian apparitions at Lourdes, France, in 1858.

When the babysitter told me that the movie was based on a true story, I was enthralled – especially during the times when the Blessed Mother spoke to Bernadette on a very personal level. During those conversations, Mary seemed to know all about Bernadette’s troubled family life and the suffering she was

experiencing at the hands of skeptical friends, neighbors and priests. This Mary was a Mary I had never imagined. My Mary up to that point was an abstraction: the Mary of Christmas books and china statues. Yet, here was a Mary who talked, a Mary who knew everything that was going on in Bernadette’s village. A Mary who *really* existed.

## MARY’S PRESENCE

That night after I had been sent upstairs, I remember lying in my bed terrified that Mary - this new, real Mary - might decide to appear to me. With the simple faith of a child, I knew she existed now



because I was afraid of her. When I went downstairs to tearfully share my fears, the babysitter chuckled and said that based on how I had behaved that evening, a Marian apparition for me was a slim possibility indeed! Then she gently assured me that the Blessed Mother would never come to scare, but rather to help me.

She was right.

Although I have never seen the Blessed Mother with my eyes in a personal apparition, I have grown to recognize her presence at different times and circumstances in my life. This recognition has come to me gradually through prayer and an openness of heart. Like a good mother, Mary is always there, waiting in the wings to guide, encourage and assist me toward her Son. When I ask her

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*Mary, the first Steward of Christ*

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 about a problem or worry, I always watch to see how she answers me through the graces she obtains from Jesus. These answers are never ethereal. They are specific and concrete. They come through nature, matter and other people.

With an open heart, I have come to recognize that Mary's presence is always this personally tied in with people and the places where they dwell. Just as in



Lourdes, I have seen firsthand how she is working in the lives of the people in my "village." Here in my neighborhood, I recognize her presence in the assistance she now gives to a sick friend who has become devoted to her. I see the way she is leading a relative through family difficulties. I even have a friend who has asked Mary to watch over her car because she cannot afford to replace it anytime soon. Sounds silly? On the contrary. What kind of a mother dismisses the genuine concern of her child?

## FOCUS ON HER SON

Many people worry about an intimate relationship with Mary, thinking that it takes away from a focus on Christ. Perhaps this is because these folks still see their faith as a theory or ideology rather than a relationship with someone who is intimately and personally present in their lives.

People living in family relationships know that love for their mother does not take away from love of their father.

A faith that is arid – empty of a living Presence - has trouble recognizing the harmony between these fundamental relationships. And this is where the apparitions of the Blessed Mother are an initial, comfortable step for so many Catholics. I suspect that deep down it is not so much the phenomena that

draws people in, but rather the startling reality of Mary's actual presence tied in to an actual place. "Mary's motherhood in our regard is manifested in a particular way in the places where she meets us: her dwelling places; places in which a special presence of the Mother is felt," says Pope John Paul II, who is particularly devoted to her. "They are of all kinds, from a special corner in the home or little wayside shrines adorned with an image of the Mother of God, to chapels and churches built in her honor."

Recognizing the presence of Mary in our homes and parishes can lead us to search more ardently for the living presence of Jesus in the places where he dwells. For if we know in our hearts that Mary, the Mother of God, continues to reveal herself in many, simple ways to those of us still in the natural world, then we probably can also recognize her Son. However, if the Eucharist and

other tangible signs of his real presence in our community of the Church still hold little meaning for us, then we still may be searching for him to fill our empty faith.

If you are having trouble recognizing Christ's presence in the world, read on. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will help us recognize him together.❖

## Life After Sunday

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# Recognizing the Presence of Jesus at Sunday Mass

Many of us know Catholics who come to Mass on Easter and Christmas, but then insist that the rituals and sermons don't do much for them during the rest of the year. Why, they wonder, can't they honor God on the Sabbath day by staying home, living good lives and spending time with their families?

## COMMON QUESTION

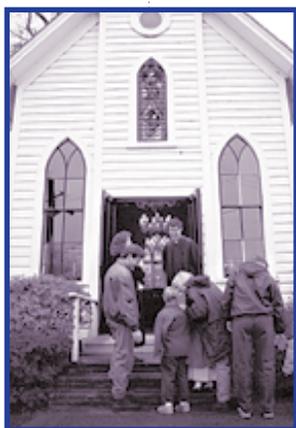
Disconnected from a living Presence, the rites of the Mass don't hold much meaning. It is only when we begin to recognize the presence of Jesus in the Word, the Eucharist and in each other that Mass becomes a life-sustaining experience. Most Catholics intellectually understand the Word and Eucharist part of this equation (although many of us are still trying to experience it in our hearts), but the "each other" part can get difficult. The call to see Jesus Christ dwelling in each other is more than just being nice or having good values. It is a true challenge that requires us to see him in every person we meet.

This is why Jesus, with his gentle yoke, asks us to get up out of the chair, rifle through the hamper to look for respectable clothes and gather with family, friends and neighbors *in person*. All of the sacraments of the Church require the presence of other people since this is the way Jesus comes to us. The Lord could have established the sacraments, these signs of "Christ with us," simply between each individual and

him alone in a room. But he did not. He wanted us to deal with each other in the flesh at a specific time and in a specific place.

## GATHER IN PERSON

Thus we cannot share the same communion with Jesus by staying home and saying prayers privately in lieu of Sunday Mass. Attending the liturgy and participating in the Sacrament of the Eucharist specifically requires us to drag our bodies to the local church, sit and listen to the Scripture readings and offer ourselves to the Father together with the Sacrifice of Christ on the altar. We do this together as a community with our families, our friends, the parishioners who drive us crazy, the sloppy dressers, the whining children, the disinterested teens, etc. "It is very easy to believe in the indwelling presence of Christ in the



souls of imaginary people; to believe in it in people whom we do not know; but it is very difficult to believe in it in the case of our own relations and our intimate friends," Caryll Houselander reminds us in *Reed of God*.

"Going to church" – even with those hostile children sitting in the back seat of the car – ensures that the Lord gathers his people, body and soul, so they can recognize his presence within the Word, the Eucharist, and perhaps the biggest challenge of all – in each other. ❖

## WE PROCESS TO HONOR THE PRESENCE OF MARY

Many parishes hold a May procession of some type either during or after Mass on the first weekend of May.

These processions are wonderful opportunities to honor the Mother of God and meditate on her presence in your home, your parish and the world. "Mary remains ever the path that leads to Christ," reflected Pope Paul VI. "Every encounter with her can only result in an encounter with Christ himself."



Every parish has at least one place that is particularly devoted to Mary. This may be a Mary altar or statue in the church, or an outside shrine or place of prayer. Either way, these places are probably where many of your fellow parishioners come to the Blessed Mother with special needs and cares. Perhaps this year, this is the spot to end your procession – where Mary's presence is felt most keenly by the people who know her.

Most May processions feature spring flowers, new Easter clothes and recitation of the Rosary. In some places, the First Communion children lead the procession in their white clothes.

This year, offer to help the parishioners who organize this lovely event and work together to honor the presence of Mary in your parish as she gently leads your family, friends and neighbors to her Son. ❖

# A Place of Encounter

**A** church is not the only special place where we encounter the presence of the Lord. In fact, your own home must be a primary place where his presence is recognized. This is really not as difficult or outrageously pious as it sounds, since it is almost instinctive to seek out those we love almost any place. “If you have ever loved anyone deeply,” Caryll Houselander observes, “and then lost him through separation, estrangement, or even by death, you will know that there is an instinct to look for him in every crowd. The human heart is not reasonable; it will go on seeking for those whom it loves even when they are dead.”

## GETTING THERE ...

During the Easter season, start the Church year anew by inviting a priest to come bless the place where you live. The rite of blessing is an especially beautiful one, involving the whole family and calling on the Lord to send a special guardian angel for the home, a “holy angel from heaven to watch over, to cherish, to protect, to abide with, and to defend all who dwell in this house.” The children will especially love the fact that the priest sprinkles holy water in every room (even the most humble) to sanctify this important dwelling place of Jesus in their midst. ❖



This natural instinct hit home for me with the sudden death of my own father in an auto accident 15 years ago. I recognized this desire to continue to seek the presence of the one we love, not in me, but in my five-year-old nephew. My brother’s son, Anthony, had a special relationship with his grandfather. My father often retired early in the evening because he rose early in the morning for his construction job. When my brother visited in the evening, Anthony loved to bound down the hall and rouse his “Pappy” from bed so they could spend some time together. They would sit and talk, watch TV and just enjoy being together. Clearly my father loved this interruption. It was a special time with his grandson that they both grew to cherish.

In the hospital, after my father’s sudden death, my brother wondered how he would tell his little boy what had happened. Later he brought Anthony to my parent’s home. I will never forget the image of that young child as he first arrived. He knew exactly where to look for his grandfather. Not randomly in a crowd like an unreasonable adult, but in that special place they shared together. As he walked down the hall towards his grandfather’s bedroom, his approach became much more deliberate and measured. Trembling, he slowly entered the doorway, and peered around the corner, hoping against hope to find

his Pappy in that familiar place. As he looked, he slowly lowered his head and turned to embrace his father who was right behind him. He softly began to cry. His father’s words were true. His Pappy was gone.

## SACRED PLACE AT HOME

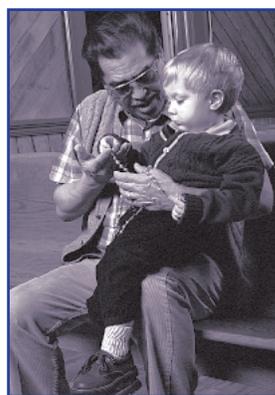
The dignity with which that little boy approached the bedroom struck me at that moment and has stayed with me these many years.

For him, that spot in my parent’s home had become a kind of sacred place – a place of tender encounter – a place now instinctively close to his heart because it reminded him of someone he loved.

In a similar way, how often is our home the place of encounter with the Someone we are called to love, Jesus Christ? Do we recognize and enjoy his presence there – in our own home – through the members of our family? Even more, have we set aside a special place where we spend time with him alone on a daily basis, a place where we reflect on his Word and seek his companionship in our lives?

In the same way that the Church is a sacred place because of his presence, our home and family can be a “domestic church” because he dwells there, too. By carving out a place where the presence of Christ lives in our home and hearts, we truly become a concrete sign of his presence in the world. ❖

— John M. Capobianco



# The Presence of a Mother

Perhaps my favorite place when I was in college was the grotto on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. For those of you who have never been there, it is a reproduction of the grotto at Lourdes, France. On many evenings, my friends and I would walk over to the grotto from Saint Mary's College across the street to get some exercise and say a prayer. It was usually hard to find an unlit candle in the black iron stands under the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes up in the grotto niche. Students of all shapes and sizes would be on their knees at the railing, many with their heads in their hands (including my personal favorite, the big burly guys) talking with her about grades, dates, cranky roommates and other problems. In our tortured youth, we knew that this was the place to find the presence of a Mother. Even my most skeptical friends would sneak over to the grotto before a big test to implore Mary's help - just in case she was really there.

## A MARY PLACE

I would venture to say that few of my college friends - including me - go so regularly to a "Mary place" for prayer the way we did 20 years ago. In the rough and tumble of our busy adult lives, we have probably forgotten the comfort and peace we felt during our grotto days as we



put our small, very personal worries in her hands.

Luckily, it is never too late to reconnect with a Mother.

Whether it be a grotto, a home altar or backyard shrine, the presence of Mary can be felt in the places where we go to meet her. "In all these places that unique testament of the Crucified Lord is wonderfully actualized," notes Pope John Paul II. "In them man feels that he is entrusted and confided to Mary; he goes there in order to be with her, as with his Mother; he opens his heart to her and speaks to her about everything; he 'takes her to his own home'."

Men and women throughout the centuries have seen Christ's instructions to St. John from the

## GETTING THERE ...

Home altars are sacred spaces set aside to recognize the presence of Jesus and his Mother in your home. If you don't have a special place in your house for prayer or devotion and feel self-conscious about a big "religious display," begin during the month of May with a simple blessed statue of Mary. Put it in a place the whole family agrees on and then encourage everyone to go there to be with the Blessed Mother. Ask children to bring fresh flowers for Mary during the month. Perhaps your family Bible, a prayer card, a vial of holy water or some other family sacramental can be kept there, too. Whatever your family chooses, a home altar with a statue of the Blessed Mother is a perfect first step to learning to love Jesus with the heart of Mary. ❖

cross as a clear spiritual path: "behold your Mother," he said to his beloved friend. "And from that hour on," the Gospel records, "the apostle took her into his home." (Jn 19: 27)

By bringing the Blessed Mother into our homes through a home altar or statue, the recitation of the Rosary or some other concrete sign of her constant presence, we, too, seek her maternal care. The Blessed Mother is the one to go to when our journey of faith is blocked by the "big tests" of adult life: problems at work, family estrangements, financial worries. "[By] serving the Immaculate faithfully," St. Maximilian Kolbe once wrote, "we can give the most help also to our family; in fact, isn't she in a position to help them better than we without comparison? Let us recommend all those dear to our heart to her, and she, the best of mothers, will provide them with the best help possible." ❖ — M.B.N.

## A Mother in Charge

When St. Teresa of Avila was assigned to head up a Carmelite convent that had been living in a fairly lax way, the sisters there were furious. Teresa, whose reforms were unpalatable to many of them, saw that her leadership was being undermined. So, she put a large statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on the prioress' chair with the keys to the convent. This concrete sign of the presence of Mary in their midst reminded the nuns who was really in charge. After that, Teresa earned her sisters' allegiance through the presence of the Mother who led them to see her Son in each other. ❖

# Recognizing His Presence in the Eucharist

**O**ur parish priest says that it always saddens him during preparation for the Sacrament of the Eucharist when some of the Second Graders walk into the church and do not cross themselves with holy water or genuflect toward the tabernacle. This is not because he thinks they have no discipline. It is worse. As the children walk in, they

clearly have no sense of the living presence of Jesus right there in the church - a disconnection with Christ that perhaps has been conveyed by their parents.

In our April 1995 issue of *Life After Sunday*, we cited a 1994 New York Times/CBS poll stating that 70% of young adult American Catholics (ages 18-44) described the bread and wine after the Consecration as “symbolic reminders” of Christ, rather than his actual Body and Blood. Among Catholics 65 and older, only 51% said the bread and wine are changed into Christ’s Body and Blood. These sad statistics may explain the Second Graders’ genuflection problem. Why would you genuflect to someone you don’t even realize is there?

The Church teaches that the living Jesus is truly present in the consecrated hosts reserved in all the tabernacles of the world. The parish church is a sacred and holy place because of Jesus in the tabernacle and the community of faith that

## PRAYER TO MARY BEFORE THE TABERNACLE

Mother of God, come with me into the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Help me speak to him and listen to him. Help me to understand his thoughts and wishes and to follow him always and in all things, just as you did.

- St. Louis de Montfort.

gathers there, not by virtue of the sacred building itself. Because so many of us have failed to recognize the living Jesus, we do not even understand what sacred means. Times, things, and places are sacred *when we are in his presence.*

Biographers say that St. Teresa of Avila used to laugh when people told her they wished they had lived during the time of Christ. She wondered how they could miss the fact that in the Blessed Sacrament we have him “just as truly present as he was then.” ❖

— M.B.N.

## GETTING THERE ...

### Seeing the Presence of Jesus in the Least Among Us

Your parish probably has a number of social justice and community service projects that it conducts for needy people in your area. Whenever you participate in these activities, it is good to remember that we are not called to help just to “be charitable,” but rather to see Jesus dwelling in each person who is poor, down-trodden or persecuted. Through them, we are offered the opportunity to serve him. Through him, our efforts to help them will bear real fruit. ❖

## RECOGNIZING A DIFFERENCE

Our friend Margie, a former Protestant, recently told us about an experience she had as a college student touring the great churches of Europe. Whenever she walked in to a Catholic basilica or cathedral, she could sense that something was different. She was struck not only by the beautiful rituals of the liturgy, but also by a very concrete presence – a presence she did not recognize in her church at home. Only later during instruction in the Catholic faith did she come to recognize this presence as Jesus Christ, truly present in the tabernacle under the appearance of bread consecrated during the Mass. Although she could not name this presence during her European trip, she still recognized a fullness of faith that was missing from her experience of Christianity. ❖

— M.B.N.



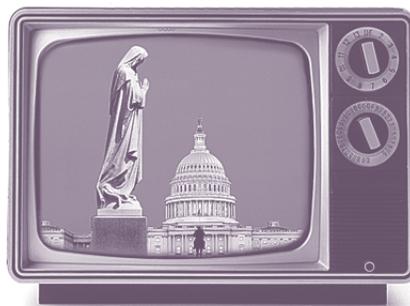
# Seeing the Presence of God in World Affairs

It is always interesting to reflect on the story of Exodus, the compelling Biblical account of how Yahweh led his people out of oppression in the land of Egypt. Although Jewish scribes recorded the event in the heroic tradition, the reality of packing up the family and the rest of the household on a day's notice must have been an overwhelming task, indeed. How many of those Jewish families had the time or wherewithal to experience the majestic presence of Yahweh as he moved his people safely out of captivity? Were the tasks of everyday life just too distracting to allow them to focus on the direct intervention of the ever-present God who loved them? And furthermore, does this ever happen to us – even when the evidence of a Presence is right before our eyes?

## THE LORD AT WORK

Consider the collapse of the Soviet Union. Could it be that like the event of Exodus, this was a great sign of the presence of the Lord at work in our world? Or do we experience a God who is too remote for such intimate involvement in our affairs?

Many secular media outlets have acknowledged the hand of Pope John Paul II in the most sensitive aspects of the collapse of Communism - first within his native Poland and later, within the other countries of the Soviet Bloc. World leaders consulted the Pope often as developments continued during the 1980s and early 1990s. Yet why is it so hard for us to see the Lord at work within all of them to make a change for his captive



people? Did the harried Jewish mother gathering up her family's possessions see Moses just as a political leader or a leader personally led by Yahweh?

According to published reports, Pope John Paul II considers the peaceful collapse of Communism a wonderful work of the Lord for our time through the direct intercession of the Blessed Mother. He also says that his own involvement is a gift from the Mother whom he credits with the failure of an assassination attempt on his life in 1981. That day was the anniversary of the first apparition at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. During a 1991 visit to Fatima, the Pope thanked the Blessed Mother for "unexpected changes which restored confidence to peoples who were oppressed and humiliated for so long... My Mother for ever, and especially on May 13, 1981, when I felt your helpful presence at my side." (Today, one of the bullets that struck him rests inside the crown of Mary's statue at the Basilica of Fatima, Portugal.)

Now if we read about these events in the Bible, we would be wowed by the work of the Lord on behalf of his people. Today it is harder for us to grasp. Do we see the Lord dwelling in the people navigating the diplomatic process in the

Middle East today? Do we see Jesus, the Lord of History, in Fidel Castro, our president or members of our Congress? Do we believe the Lord has a path for each of *them* just as he does for each of *us*? This is the hard work of our faith. Perhaps we can begin by scanning the daily headlines and asking the Holy Spirit to show us signs of the presence of the Lord in the world. And then maybe we can take a moment, like our ancient Jewish brethren, and look around in the midst of our busy lives and recognize the mysterious wonder of the Lord's presence in our world. ❖

## COINCIDENCE OR CONFIRMATION?

Many of the milestones of the Soviet collapse happened to fall on major Marian feasts in the liturgical calendar. Some people see this as confirmation of Mary's intercession on behalf of her children. Others see it as sheer coincidence. Whichever way you consider it, the facts remain.

May 13, 1981, Anniversary of the First Apparition at Fatima: Failed attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II by an Eastern Bloc assassin.

Aug. 22, 1991, Feast of the Queenship of Mary: Collapse of the coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Dec. 8, 1991, Feast of the Immaculate Conception: The founding of the commonwealth by the three leading republics with the announcement on the same day that the Soviet Union is dead.

Dec. 25, 1991, Feast of the Nativity: The final dissolution of the Soviet Union by President Gorbachev. ❖

# Presence

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## FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

### Why This Life is Reasonable

The first epistle of St. John teaches us how to distinguish between good and evil spirits (or inspirations, or ideas): “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God...By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist... (John 4: 1-3)

The community to which John is writing had many “false prophets” who denied the identity of Jesus as fully God-in-the-flesh: God in matter, God in time and space, God localized in this world, in concrete, material places, in the lives of concrete people. The “evil spirit” denies the Presence of Christ in the flesh, rendering Him an abstraction, an idea, an inspiration no matter how powerful.

There is one way we can always avoid this error and make sure we encounter the real Christ, namely, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, where this Presence began. As Mother of the Church, the Presence of Christ in the flesh always reaches us in communion with Mary. That is why this issue, devoted to ways through which we can emphasize and experience the power of the Lord’s Presence, is devoted to her. Through her we will experience the Lord as our contemporary, our companion, inseparable from all aspects and dimensions of our lives in this world: present, not only Sundays, but in our “life after Sunday.”

— Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete,  
U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation, an  
international movement in the Church

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## Ponder In Your Heart

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you recognize a Presence in your life? (p. 1 and 2)

- When is this Presence most recognizable to you?
- Why is the Presence of the Lord and his Mother always tied to a specific time and place?

What is the difference between attending Mass and staying home to say prayers and read Scripture? (p. 3)

- Why do we need the presence of others to fully participate in the sacraments?
- What special places and events in your parish honor the presence of Mary?

In what places do you encounter the living Presence of Christ in your home? (p. 4)

- Do you see his Presence in the members of your family?
- Do you set aside some time each day to welcome Christ into your heart as well as your home?

Do you go to Mary in the most trying times of your life? (p. 5)

- What part of your home could be set aside as a place for Mary?
- Give an example of a time when Mary led you to her Son.

Do you sometimes long to meet Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh? (p. 6)

- Like St. Teresa of Avila, do you see the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament “just as truly present as he was then”?
- What can you do in your parish to help others recognize his intimate Presence there?

How do you see the Presence of the Lord when global problems seem too difficult to overcome by purely human means? (p. 7)

- How does Pope John Paul II’s intimate relationship with the Blessed Mother affect his life and actions in the world?
- Do the headlines prompt you to pray that the Lord will bring his Presence into the events of the day?

Life After Sunday is a great tool for small group discussion!  
For leader's guides, visit [www.lifeaftersunday.com](http://www.lifeaftersunday.com)