

S. JAMES MEYER

Living
with Real
Presence

Eucharist AS AN
APPROACH TO *life*



TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS

twentythirdpublications.com

C O N T E N T S

First, a Story	1
-----------------------------	---

Part One: As Real as It Gets

<i>1.1 Jumping with Real Joy</i>	5
<i>1.2 Fruit of Our Labor. Work of Our Hands</i>	15
<i>1.3 Real Deep</i>	23

Part Two: Substance and Essence

<i>2.1 The Human Condition</i>	33
<i>2.2 Blessed, Broken, and Shared</i>	37
<i>2.3 Do This in Memory of Me</i>	51
<i>2.4 He Took Bread and Wine</i>	57
<i>2.5 He Broke Himself Open</i>	63
<i>2.6 He Poured Himself Out</i>	67
<i>2.7 He Gave Himself to Others</i>	73

Part Three: Real Presence. Real Relationships.

<i>3.1 Real Presence in Our Relationship with God</i>	87
<i>3.2 Real Presence in Our Relationship with Self</i>	95
<i>3.3 Real Presence in Our Relationship with Others</i>	101
<i>3.4 Real Presence in Our Relationship with Society</i>	107
<i>3.5 Real Presence in Our Relationship with Creation</i> ...	115

At the Close, Opening	119
------------------------------------	-----

FIRST, A STORY

We gathered around the island in my mom's kitchen. Someone made popcorn, and my brother emerged from the basement with an armload of cold Pabst Blue Ribbon beers, which he brought specifically for this occasion. We had just returned from the wake service honoring my grandfather, and what better tribute could we, his progeny, offer than to gather in his memory, share the beer he served at the card table in his own home, and tell stories. This is how he lived and loved, surrounded by family, laughing, talking, and simply being present with one another.

Each of us, we discovered, knew Grandpa uniquely. Our lives had been affected in different and individual ways by what he said, how he related, and the way he lived. For the first time, I saw him through my dad's eyes, and I could see how my father and his father were one. Likewise, I discovered Grandpa through the eyes and heart of my mother, who entered the family at the age of twenty, and through my sisters and my brother. Individually, we knew him only

partially. But in shared communion with each other, we could know him far more completely.

We shared the moral code he passed to us, including his commitment to a life of purpose, his insistence on integrity, his devotion to family, and his instruction to always be your brother's keeper.

As the evening grew late, it became increasingly obvious to me that Grandpa was present with us in that kitchen. He lived and breathed in us, around us, among us, and between us in a very real way. He was one in us, and we were one with him. This is how love works.

When we think of real presence in Eucharist, we tend to forget that presence is not a thing; it is an experience, an encounter, and a real form of intimacy. If we dare go deep in our spirituality, we discover that real presence is a way of life, perhaps *the* way of life that brings hope, compassion, peace, harmony, mercy, joy, and love to us, to our relationships, and to all humanity. It is the source of all happiness now and forever.

JUMPING WITH REAL JOY

I come from a line of rural and semi-rural German Catholics for whom everything, including Mass on Sunday, was a chance to get together, laugh out loud, and play a little Sheepshead. In fairness, this doesn't mean we didn't take our faith seriously. Quite to the contrary. I have never known a community of people who truly understood how to integrate life and faith like those folks did. Gathering for Mass was not about stepping aside from life; it was about connecting in life. We brought ourselves, our real selves, sometimes even our real smells, into communion with each other.

From that perspective, either church wasn't sacred, or all of life was sacred. Either church wasn't a place for reverence, or all of creation was a place for reverence. I was raised to believe it was the latter. Church and life were entangled like family dinners and laughter, like pot roast and potatoes. I couldn't really tell where one stopped and the other started.

On a particularly sweltering Saturday evening in August, we gathered for Mass at Corpus Christi Catholic Church, a small country parish perched on a hill in Bakerville, Wisconsin. It was admittedly a bit cliché, a scene at sunset amidst rolling cornfields, the parish cemetery across the road, and a local country tavern—Jerome’s Country Bumpkin—just down the hill, where two quarters dropped on the pine bar would buy an eight-ounce glass of Pabst Blue Ribbon for yourself and a second for whoever was standing alongside you.

If you’ve ever been to Wisconsin in early August, you already know how the weather will curl your hair. On this particular evening, the humidity hung so thick your glasses steamed, and the mosquitoes were so hungry they lifted livestock out of the surrounding pastures. Our church was without air conditioning because, after all, we were of rugged rural stock. We had no use for the energy-guzzling, air-polluting, soft comforts needed in the city. The cabs on the tractors were a different matter, of course.

Inside the church, Father Charlie told the acolytes to serve Mass in their street clothes, while he vested only in an alb and stole sans chasuble. “There is nothing holy about heat stroke,” he told the community. He brought a pragmatic and approachable disposition to liturgy that some might find borderline scandalous by today’s standards. Say what you will about his style, but the church was full that evening and the people were happy. With electric fans whirring in every corner and overhead, the women waved worship aids in front of their faces and the men, strong and stoic farmers, pretended to be unaf-

fectured even as they discreetly wiped their brows with handkerchiefs.

Making his way down the side aisle, Kenny Stumpfenbach stopped to open the window near where we were seated. These were tilt-style stained glass windows with a latch halfway up. By unhitching the latch and pulling it inward, the bottom of the window tilted outward. It was a very functional design for a man of average height. But Kenny lived on the upswing of life's bell curve, so the latch remained a couple inches above his upstretched arm, which, as a side note, bore the inevitable stain of failed antiperspirant. With one hand braced against the wall to steady himself, he rose onto his tiptoes. At the very peak of his pirouette, his reach still fell a bit short of the latch. Determined, Kenny jumped. It was a bit comical to watch this stout man push all his heft into a hop that raised his heels no more than a two-by-four on edge. Then he jumped again. And again. And yet again. With each leap and swing of his hock-like arm, a large ring of keys socialized with the loose coins in his pocket. And with each landing, the gravity of their force pulled his trousers down about a half inch. And then another half inch. And another.

To my brother and me, this was just about the funniest thing we could imagine happening in church. Raised to be at least marginally proper, we restrained our laughter. At first. Then we made eye contact. It started as a silent chuckle, escalated to repressed chortles, and erupted in convulsive giggles that shook our bodies. My eyes watered like open hydrants, and I bit into the heel of my hand to hold back audible guffaws. Each time I thought I had it

under control, I'd hear a snort leak from my brother and the cycle would start over.

Before you rush to judge us for laughing at poor Mr. Stumpfenbach, please realize we were a rather small and tight community. We knew the whole extended Stumpfenbach clan, went to school with Kenny's kids and their cousins, and knew where they all lived. Likewise, they knew all of us. They wrote "wash me, I'm dirty" in the dust on the back window of my dad's Mercury, and they brought my parents banana bread when I was in the hospital after brain surgery. We weren't laughing at Kenny in a cruel way, we were delighting in the ridiculousness of the whole scene as one does with close family and friends. And it was ridiculous! Here was a middle-aged man launching himself into a mid-Mass latch leap with such vigor he was jumping out of his pants. How can you not delight in such a magnificent and poetic expression of the human condition? This is humanity created in God's own image and likeness. And, dang, it's beautiful!

This was a community gathered for Eucharist. And it was authentically human. And it was joy-filled. There was a real presence of peace and calm, a real presence of community and communion. Life was hard for a lot of these folks, but they leaned into it together. They laughed together. They lived and loved together. During good times and bad, there was always joy. Through births and baptisms, divorces and deaths, there was always joy. Even in the absence of happiness, there remained an abiding joy.

As people leave church today, they'll often remark that a story in the homily was so funny they wanted to laugh

out loud, or that the message was so poignant they wanted to break into applause. “Why didn’t you?” I ask. “Why didn’t you express your delight and joy?” They typically look back at me oddly perplexed, as though the answer is obvious to everyone else. I wait. Inevitably, they explain with the quasi-hushed tone of a mother correcting a child, “Well, I just didn’t think it was appropriate in church.”

Not appropriate to express human joy at Mass?! Not appropriate to express human joy when gathered in communion as one body?! Who decided that? It’s bizarre. On the way into church, people are upbeat, smiling, ready with a quick wit and friendly banter. They’re mostly authentic, bringing a real presence through the door. Likewise on the way out. But as soon as they step into the nave, it’s as though they’re waiting in line at the DMV. Faces turn to stone. What’s that about?

When I recently used the term “Catholic joy” in conversation with my wife...

Before going on, I should pause here and introduce you to Michelle. She is as down-to-earth, feet-on-the-ground, anchored-in-reality as the roots of an apple tree. When we go biking, she avoids paved trails, preferring crushed granite and dirt trails because they’re closer to the earth and more natural. On a hot day, she’d rather walk in the woods than sit by a pool. Early in our relationship, she resisted microwave ovens because they sacrifice authenticity for speed. I was young and shallow, so I didn’t even understand what she was talking about, but you get the picture. I met Michelle in the 1980s, an era when everything from music to color, from eyelashes to personalities, was synthetic, and I fell in

love with how real she was. She brought a real presence to a manufactured world. In her real presence, her deep appreciation for trilliums and heavy quilts and good books, she showed me the centered peacefulness of joy. She showed me how joy isn't something we get from life, it's the expression a grateful, loving heart gives to life. And it's contagious. When you express your joy into the world, the winds of spirit blow joy seeds into all open hearts around you.

Back on topic: when I recently used the term “Catholic joy” in conversation with my wife, her immediate response was, “That’s an oxymoron.” Let’s not just brush over that. Here’s a woman who was raised and confirmed in the Church, got married to me in the Church, brought three children for baptism and First Communion in the Church, and watched her oldest son get married in the Church; so many of her most joyful life experiences have been embedded in the Church—and yet she finds the term *Catholic joy* to be self-contradicting.

When she told me this, I got up from my chair and poured more wine into my glass. We were going to be there a while and the conversation promised to be fascinating. By the way, we greatly under-emphasize the importance of good conversation during marriage preparation. I have grown to believe the deep listening, sharing, and discovery that happens in meaningful conversation between spouses is a brilliant form of mutual prayer. When entered in loving openness with your partner, it is every bit as much of a spiritual encounter and “God experience” as any prayerful practice there is. I wanted to know more—understand more—about Michelle’s experience.