

On this feast of the Epiphany I want to preach on Matthew 2:11, “[O]n entering the house [the Magi] saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” But I want to begin with some disturbing information from a poll the Pew Research Center did a few months ago. The poll asked American Catholics whether they believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, or if they believed the Eucharist was just a symbol of Jesus. Less than a third of Catholics who were asked believed in the Real Presence. This isn’t exactly news. There have been other surveys giving roughly similar results over the past decade. But meditating on the Magi this Epiphany I was convicted of my own responsibility as a teacher of the faith for this crisis of faith in the Catholic Church – because that is what it is – a crisis of faith.

Without faith we can’t believe that Jesus is physically present in what looks like this little piece of bread. And so this belief is a standard

of Catholic faith. I teach the RCIA in the parish. And I know the spiritual journey of conversion to Catholicism is long and complicated. And I know that not every person has certain convictions about all teachings of the Church by Easter. The faith continues to grow after baptism. But one thing I do tell the catechumens and candidates is that if they don't believe Jesus is present in the Eucharist they should wait until they do before entering the Catholic Church. This is just too central a doctrine. The Eucharist is the central act of worshipping God for a Catholic – and the central reality of that worship is that we are receiving Jesus Himself when we consume the host.

The Magi prostrated themselves before the infant Jesus at Bethlehem. That is what we Catholics are doing throughout the mass – and any time we enter a Catholic church, imitating the Magi. Many of you may already know this, but it's worth reviewing, given the poll results. (I preached about this to the school kids last month – but then thought, Adults need to hear it too"). During the Eucharistic Prayer at

mass, when the priest, acting as Jesus Himself, says the words of consecration over the bread and wine the laity are kneeling. In doing the they're doing the same thing as the Wisemen did – offering Jesus homage.

When Catholics enter a Catholic church, we should look for the tabernacle and then genuflect towards it because Christ the King of the Universe is there in the hosts reserved in the tabernacle, and we want to acknowledge His presence. When you come forward for communion you bow to the host before receiving, and the priest or minister says, “The Body of Christ.” That is not only a proclamation of what – or Who - is held up before you. It is also a question directed to you, “Do you believe this is Jesus?” If not, then you should not receive, out of honesty, if nothing else.

On the altar the Altar Servers or Priest spreads a square, white cloth, the corporal, before consecrating the bread and wine. The purpose of this corporal is to catch any crumb or fragment of the host

that might drop – because that is Jesus. After communion the priest makes a first purification of the vessels with water then drinks the water – in order to make sure every particle of the Eucharist is consumed by a human being. But even then, the Eucharistic Ministers rinse the vessels again at the Sacrarium – a sink back in the sacristy that flows directly into the ground rather than the sewer. The altar linens used at mass are not treated like other linens. They are first soaked in water to remove any stray fragments of the hosts left on them. That water is then poured out on the ground outside, not down the drain. Only then are the linens washed in the washing machine.

These elaborate gestures and measures are all designed to honor and safeguard the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Like the Magi, we Catholics are still doing homage to our King, who has not abandoned us, but remains as physically present to us in the Blessed Sacrament as he was in Bethlehem.

Jesus Himself said in John 6, “that the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself . . . for anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” And I could on – but I can’t make anyone believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist just by quoting scripture. Only Jesus can give you that gift of faith to discern His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

But I can preach clearly about this amazing truth, and our need for it. That is my responsibility and my role in combating this crisis of faith. If you do not yet believe in the Real Presence, ask Jesus for that faith of the Magi. It’s no more marvelous that God would come to us under the appearance of bread and wine, than that He would become a little infant in a manger. Holding this truth is central to being a Catholic

disciple of Jesus, and receiving Him in the Eucharist one of its greatest blessing.