

us along the roads we travel and sits at table with us, making himself known in the breaking of the bread. In his presence, we learn that we are loved. This love, unconditional and unfailing, gives us the peace to welcome others, the inner freedom to choose to be present to them, the newness of vision to look lovingly on them, and the patience to listen to them with attentive hearts.

Today the effort to be present to others is a greater challenge than ever. Opportunities abound for participation in events and activities, for access to information from across the globe, and for entertainment on demand. As invigorating as these opportunities are, such a vast array of possibilities can create the illusion of infinite time and endless engagement. We can forget the



Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, c. 1654

limits of our humanity. Yes, we can have hundreds of “friends” by social networking, but we only have the capacity to know deeply a few people. In pursuing this multiplicity of shallow connections, we risk having no deep relationships. We, at times awoken to the need to resist consciously the superficiality that keeps us at the surface of life. We can also fall prey to the advertisements of consumerism that promise instant gratification of our senses and our emotions. If we pause to reflect on our experiences, we discover that to know ourselves and others deeply requires the patience necessary for growth in knowledge and love over time.

The rediscovery of the wealth of love that the family possesses in communion presupposes a recommitment to real presence. It invites a choice to spend time with the other. It calls each to be attentive, to listen, and to delight in the other whose difference is enriching not threatening. In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament we sit at the feet of the Teacher who can help us to learn how to be still in the presence of the Other, and therefore how to be attentive to the beauty of every other person.

We discover in Christ, present to us in the Eucharist and within us by His indwelling Spirit, the truth that love is abiding presence. In its social teachings the Church repeatedly proclaims that society is only as strong as the family. The family is only as strong as the love that unites each with the others. The love within the family is only as strong as the commitment to be really present, and thereby to love one another as we first have been loved.

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From Absence TO Presence

by Sister Mary Madeline Todd, O.P.

The human heart cannot be satisfied without love, without union with the beloved. As in the Eucharist, so also in the family, we cannot experience the joy of communion unless there is first presence, a presence that is real and abiding. It is no secret that the family faces many serious challenges today. Often we look at the problems and we propose solutions from without — from the point of view of the economy, of legal and social structures, or of cultural changes. These are important external factors in human well-being; but the strengthening of family life begins from within — from the point of view of the person and the innate desire of every person to love and to be loved. From the personal perspective, we see that we are not merely trying to address social



problems, but that there is a deep interior wound that needs to be healed in the very heart and soul of family and family life. In the presence of Jesus Christ with us in the Church, speaking to us in the Word and abiding with us in the Eucharist, we can rediscover the Presence that heals the wounds of absence. Learning to discern his Presence and to be present to him opens us, in turn, to presence to others.

Today we suffer a crisis which stems from the fact that although we long for the presence of another with whom we can share our lives and our very selves, we find instead absence. The most obvious absence is the physical absence

of people from one another. Work is an integral part of the human vocation, but it can become an escape from the often more demanding labor of building relationships. Work is meant to be at the service of family life, not

at the cost of family life. Tragically, many families of the world are driven apart by circumstances beyond their control—by war and terrorism that force them to flee their homes; or by poverty that leaves them in the position of accepting any work in any place, so as to survive. We are called to pray and work for a more just society, one that even in times of crisis prioritizes the family and its need for unity.

Among those whose life circumstances render them free to choose how they spend their time, there is an absence that is perhaps all the more painful because it has

been chosen. The illusion that having or experiencing more can fill interior emptiness entices people to pursue possessions, experiences, or pleasures. Such pursuits lack, in themselves, the power to fulfill the deepest desires of the human heart. Especially in affluent societies, many people strive to own and to do more and more, only to find themselves increasingly dissatisfied. Once when driving by a magnificent house with luxurious gardens, I commented on its beauty to my friend. She said with sadness in her eyes, “I know the woman who owns it. She would trade it all to have back her husband and the family she hoped to raise there.” If one becomes estranged from the very people who are closest, those whose love is

authentic wealth, a sense of isolation can make the emptiness overwhelming.

The problem of absence is not only physical, but also spiritual. Even if we are with one another, we can be closed to the gift of the other person. In Karol Wojtyła's drama, *Radiation of Fatherhood*, Adam, the central character, stands amidst a crowd of workers at the end of a day of labor. He is among many people, but he feels completely alone. He has rejected both the Fatherhood of God and his own fatherhood, viewing these relations as a burden to his liberty. He experiences an awakening when he realizes that beginning within the family, he has chosen his own isolation, that he is not so much alone as he is closed. His fear of entrusting himself to another and of accepting responsibility for another has been the source of his choice to be absent from community. He realizes that he can choose to risk love, to allow himself to be the "mine" of another and to accept another as "mine."



Andrei Rublev, *Icon of the Trinity*, 15th century

Recently I was sharing a meal with a friend in a busy restaurant at midday. At every table people were sitting together; they were in each other's presence without speaking to each other at all. They were all checking their phone messages and email, or browsing the internet. It was an icon of "real absence"—the inability to be attentive to the gift of the other. It isolates a person and leaves one alone in the prison of individualism.

In Rublev's icon of the Trinity we glimpse the opposite of such real absence. The three divine Persons are seated at the table, looking at one another face to face. The bowed heads of the Son and the Spirit, who are turned toward the Father, speak of attentive reverence for the One who is like themselves but also personally unique. Their openness to each other does not close them in on themselves. It opens them to shared communion with the onlooker. The fourth place at the table is toward the viewer, who is invited not only to share the meal, but more intimately to enter into the presence of the Three and to share the joy of communion of life.

The gift of real presence in the family can be rediscovered, but it requires a way of thinking and acting that is intentional and countercultural. Presence presupposes a choice to be with the other. This choice is, in itself, a loving affirmation of the other. The choice to be with a person says, "You are worthy of my time. To be with you is good because you are good." Yet more profoundly, the choice to be attentive to the other while we are together shows a love of preference. It says, "You are the most important one for me at this moment. You are more important than this business, this call, this email..." Many such moments over time become for a person the assurance of love, the basis of a deep bond of communion.

After the choice that shows a preference for the other person, presence is then mediated by a gaze. When God created the world, his gaze reflected and communicated the goodness of all he had made. After the creation of the human person, male and female in the divine image, God's gaze evoked the affirmation that they were very good. Adam and Eve's first gaze upon each other was one full of

wonder and awe, one that rejoiced to behold another with whom life could be shared in a fully personal encounter. Hans Urs von Balthasar often writes about the gaze of the mother that communicates to the child the goodness of his or her own being by awakening the child to the reality that he or she is loved. In the family each person is invited to gaze upon the other, to convey by a look of admiration and affection the goodness one sees in the other. This is fundamental to being present to each other.

In addition to seeing, presence relies upon hearing, and more than hearing, listening. Traditional iconography reflects the primacy of seeing and hearing. The persons depicted in icons have large eyes and ears, but their mouths are typically small. This representation is an instruction in attentive prayer. It invites the one who prays to look and to listen, but to speak very little. This attitude is certainly

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essential to prayer, but it is also essential in attentive presence to others. People who live in crowded cities are often the loneliest of all. Surrounded by countless others, they are in the attentive presence of none. This can easily happen even within the family. The activism of modern life can absorb so much of our time and attention that little remains for those at home. The omnipresence of noise and the superabundance of words can deafen us to the voice of others. We face the danger of becoming strangers living under the same roof.

Looking and listening are the first elements of hospitality, of welcome, and of the gift of real presence. The truth of this dynamic is evident in the visit of Jesus to the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany, as recounted in the gospel of Luke. Martha is working diligently to show hospitality to Jesus. She is preparing a meal, which could provide an opportunity for communion of mind and heart, but she is preparing the meal with great distraction of spirit. Her action is not the problem, but rather her spirit of activism. In focusing too much on the task she is performing, she has lost sight of the relationship that is the reason

for the task. Mary, on the other hand, understands the primacy of the relationship with their guest. She is aware that looking and listening are necessary if she is to be present to Jesus. This is the first hospitality, the gift of loving attentiveness to the other. This loving attentiveness can then motivate action. Family life is full of acts of service, but in order for these actions to communicate the love that is their motive, there is first a need to be present to one another.

Presence reveals love, and abiding presence reveals unchanging love. This is what Jesus Christ taught us by the gifts of the Eucharist and of the Holy Spirit. Before returning to the Father, he assured his disciples, "I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28:20). God's desire to be with us, expressed most fully by his Incarnation, his coming to be with us as one of us, endures. In

him and in his faithfulness is the first and most profound remedy for real absence. He is really present, infinitely attentive, ceaselessly choosing to be with us and within us. He is never too busy to hear us, to listen to the desires of our hearts, which he alone can fulfill.

Jesus meets us in the ordinary events of our daily lives, as he met the woman of Samaria, sitting beside the well, recognizing our thirst for love and offering to satisfy it. He offers us, as he did her, the gift of living water that wells up from within. He teaches us to worship in Spirit and in truth, to recognize that each moment can be a point of encounter with the One who thirsts for our love as we thirst for his. He sends us to share with those we love the invitation to meet him also. He makes us witnesses to the healing power of his presence.

Jesus meets us as he met the discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus. He engages in conversation with us, deeply interested in our hopes and dreams, our disappointments and our doubts. He shares our sorrows and sheds light on our questions by his word. He walks with