Practicing the Presence of God II: Symbols and Idols

All of us want to be remembered. There are special times of the year -birthdays, anniversaries, and family holidays- when it is crucial for us to be remembered. To be forgotten at such times is to be excluded in a particularly painful way. When our presence is not considered essential to a gathering or event , in a certain sense we disappear. It is as if we have never been.

[In ancient times] no worse fate could befall a person than not have [their] name blotted out –[their] line destroyed, [their] life on earth forgotten. This was the ultimate form of personal annihilation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, we name things (a sign of power, control, and handy for interacting). We put our names on things. We are drawn to objects that inspire and we imbue objects as keys to memory, or authority, or any number of other things. When the ‘thing’ points to something bigger than itself, then it is a symbol. Think of stop signs, or the feelings that come with a certain sent, or image, or taste. We are transported beyond the thing to something larger. It is a symbol, a tool for memory and transformation. However, when the ‘thing’ becomes the object of worship itself, it is an idol. Idols cannot ultimately offer us what we want from them. Nor do they point beyond themselves toward something greater. The ‘thing’ becomes the object of focus, of prayer, of worship, or memory. We are called to remember God.

In the Christian context, our remembrance of God is an extension of the great *anamnesis*, or remembrance of the Sunday Eucharist, into every day of the week, into each moment of every day…

It is this anamnetic activity or ‘remembering’ that the German theologian Karl Rahner has called the primary action for the Church.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are many objects that point past themselves, directing our gaze toward God. The ones that engage us in the widest variety of ways are the elements of communion. No matter what our communion theology may be, we find touch, taste, smell, sight, perhaps even our hearing, being engaged when we partake in table fellowship for this sacred feast.

So, this week, find a way to have the elements of communion available through the week. Our tradition allows for this. Perhaps it can be through having the elements out, perhaps it is a screen shot that will be your background computers and phones. Practice the presence of God through this act of remembering. Let the symbols draw you closer to God in prayer and in life through prayer. And then reach out to each other and fellowship through this act of remembering.

1. Mass, Robin & Gabriel O’Donnell O.P. Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church (Abingdon Press, 1990). 419-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)