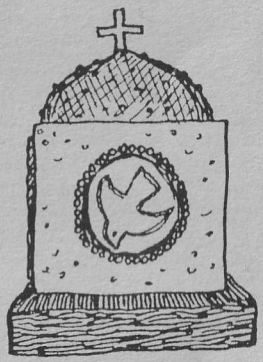
the veiled presence



the veiled presence

"We give you thanks, Lord our God,
for giving us confidence to enter
by the new and living path you
opened for us through the veil
that is the flesh of your Christ."

(Liturgy of St. James; Prayer of the Veil)

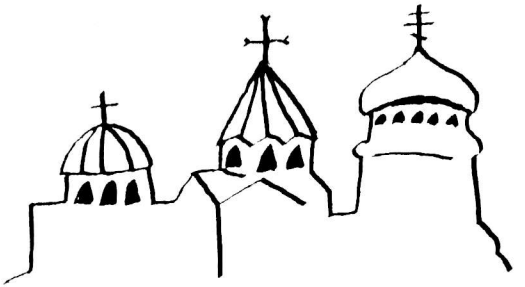
a Byzantine perspective on adoration

text and pictures: Clare Anatolios
dedicated to: Pain de Vie Community, Toronto
1991.



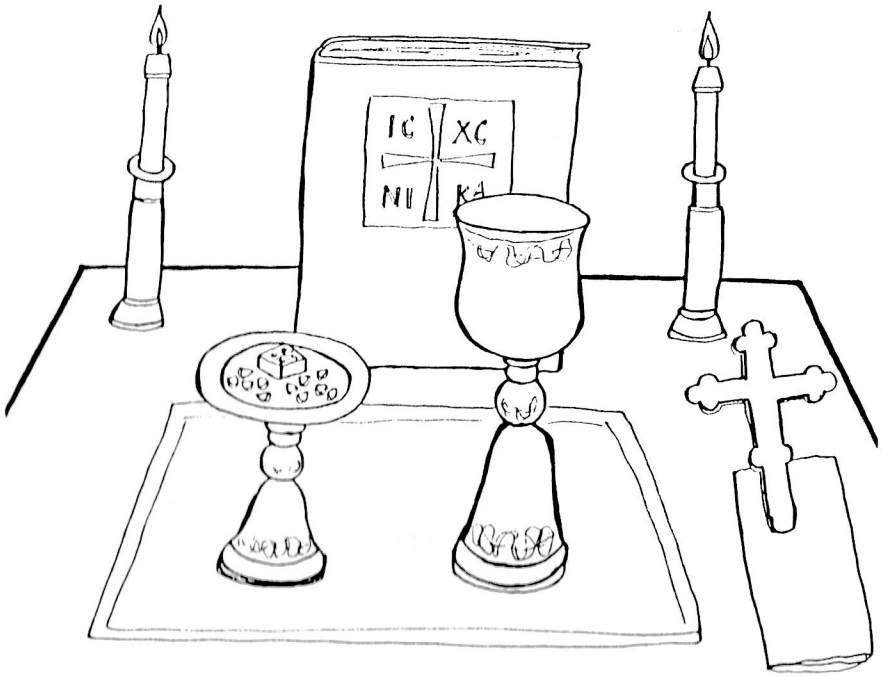
Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament has not played a great part in Byzantine spirituality. It is more "characteristic" of the Latin church.

But, in fact, it is not at all foreign to the essence, the heart, of our spirituality.



In the Divine Liturgy, we enter into the Kingdom.

Here, the Holy Spirit reveals the community **and** the bread of the Eucharist as the Body of Christ.



"sacrificed... shed... for the life of the world and its salvation..."

(Divine Liturgy)



In the Eucharist, the whole Church is **one.**



In the early Church, people used to take home the consecrated bread that remained after the Liturgy, to communicate during the week. Deacons would take it to the sick, and to communities that had no priest.

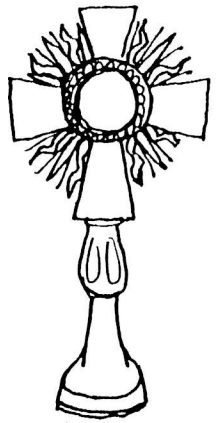


In fact, this is how the special presence of Christ in the reserved bread came to be understood and developed.

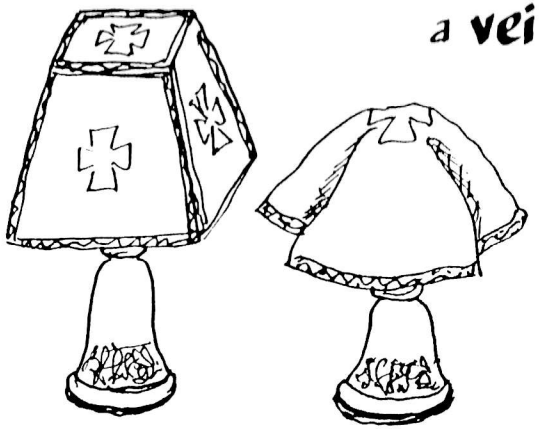




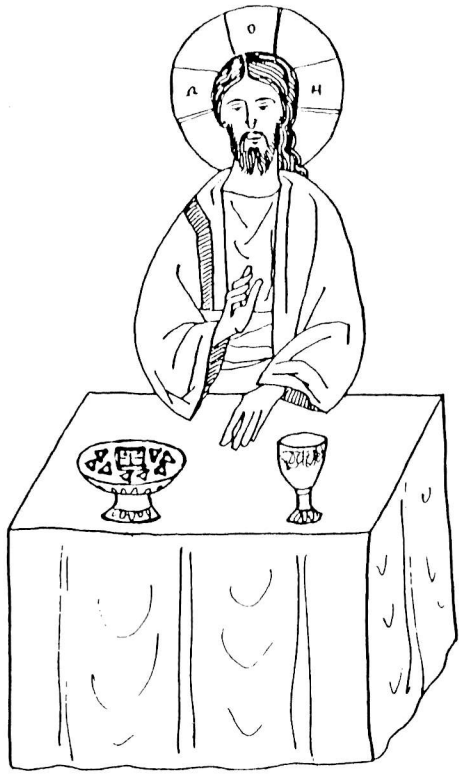
In the West,
the emphasis has
been on the
visible presence
of Christ in the
consecrated bread...

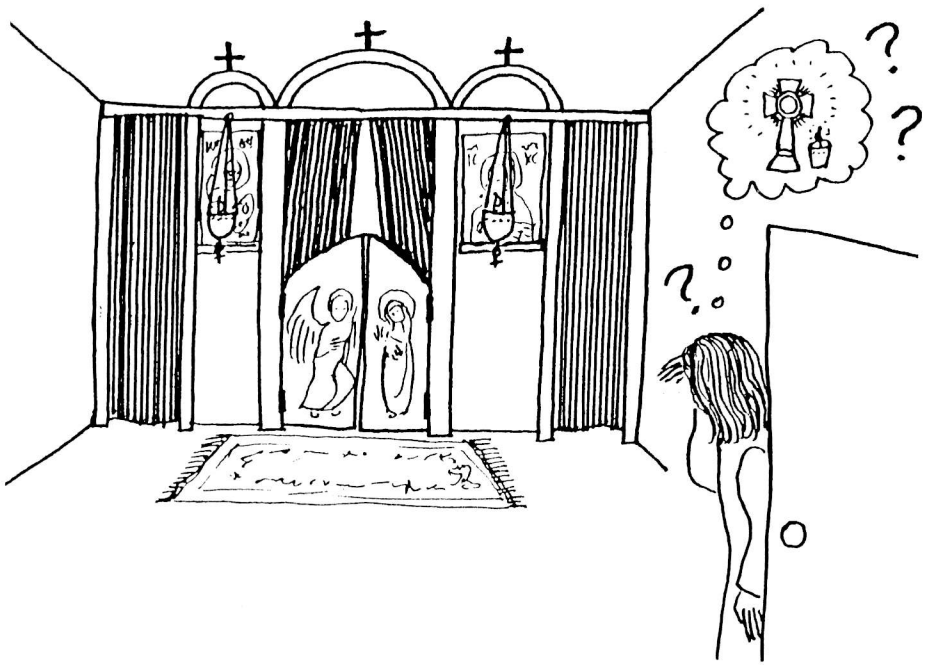


...Whereas in the East,
the presence of
Christ is more of
a "hidden" one ~
a **veiled presence.**



Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is possible because of the presence of Jesus, the presence of God. God has revealed himself to us here. He is alive and present to us in the Reserved Sacrament.

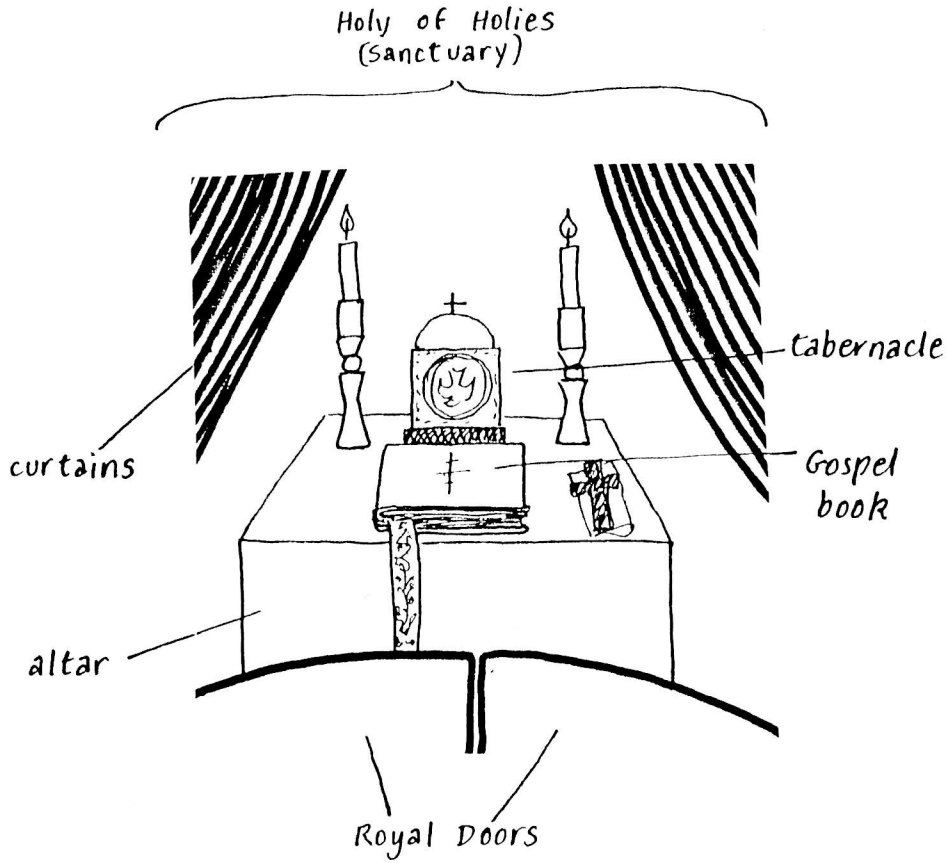




At St. John's, as in most Byzantine churches, it seems as if the Reserved Sacrament is hidden.

If you don't know where to look, you'll miss it.

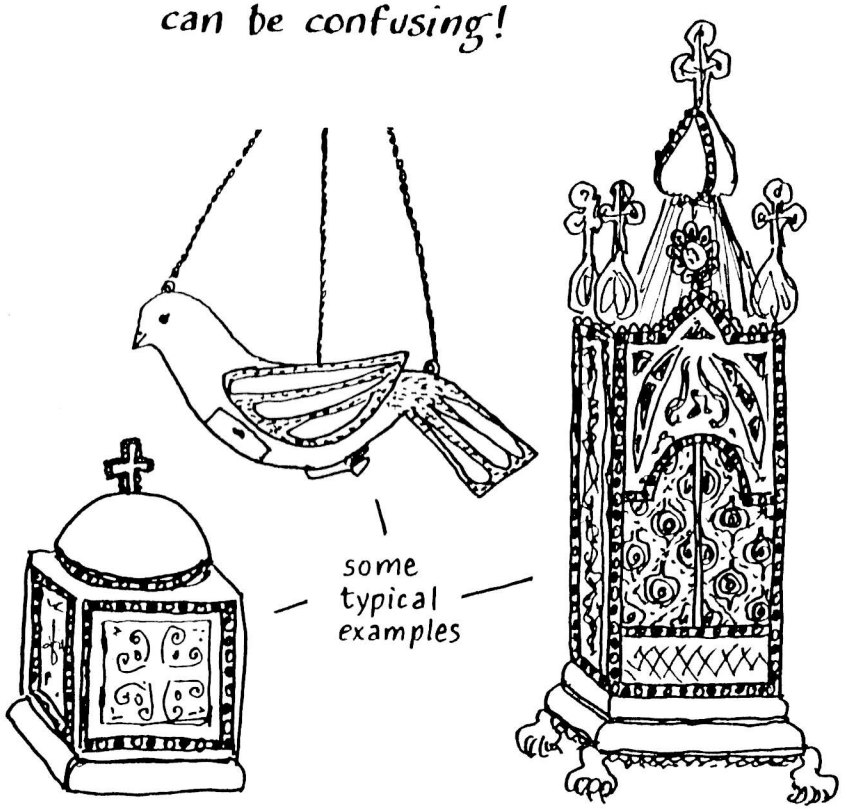
It's not in a little niche of its own, or a special side chapel, but in the Holy of Holies, on the altar itself (or over it), behind the curtains which are usually kept closed.

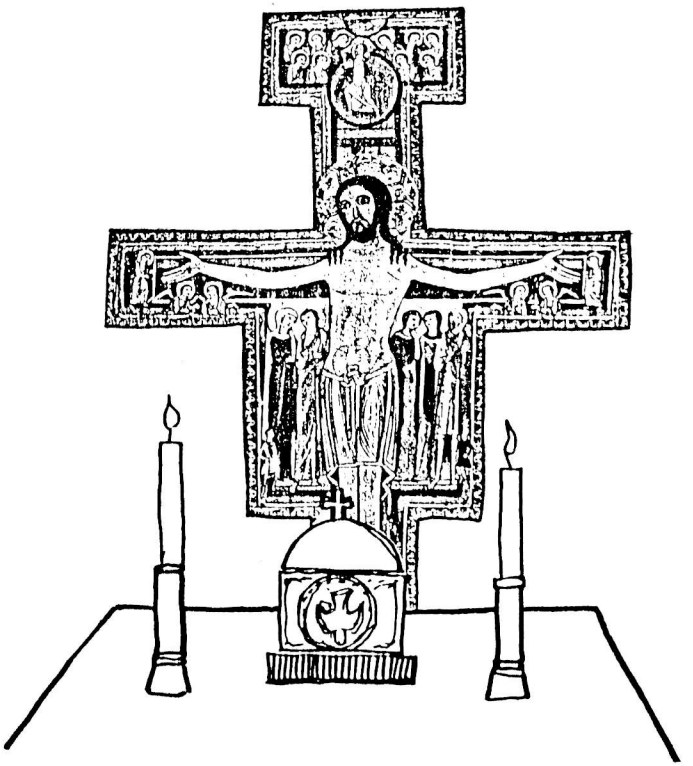


In the Byzantine church, the tabernacle is called the

artophore

(Bread Box). It can be one of many different shapes. This can be confusing!





Behind the altar is a crucifix. From the crucifix Jesus silently looks at us.

Jesus, present in the artophore, is silent there before us.

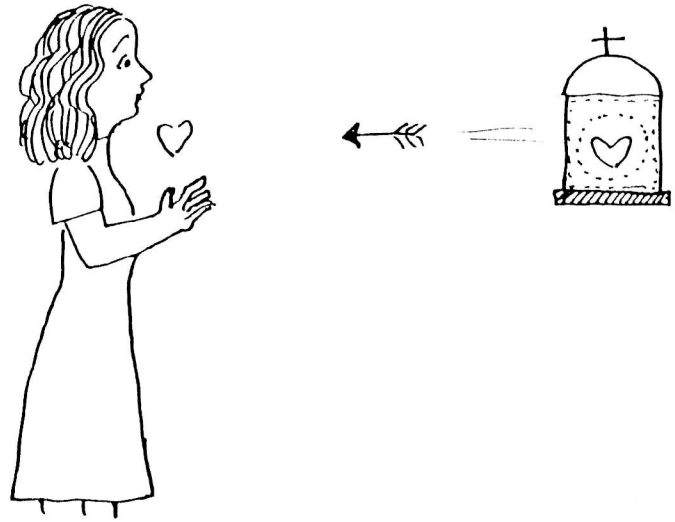
Somehow,.. it's almost unthinkable... he is there.

Is he enclosed in that little box?
-a captive?
-a prisoner?

As on the Cross, he is a captive by choice, a captive of his own love for us...

...us, who can look at him hanging on the Cross and remain so unmoved.

He wills to be there... it doesn't matter whether we can make sense of it.



And it is hard for us to understand how, or why, God would become so helpless. It seems that he almost has to cooperate with us putting the Sacrament in a box and then just leaving it there and forgetting all about it.

He puts himself at our mercy... and it is this which is irresistible ~ if we think about it,
or notice it!

But if we do notice, our hearts are pierced by a love which goes to such an extent.

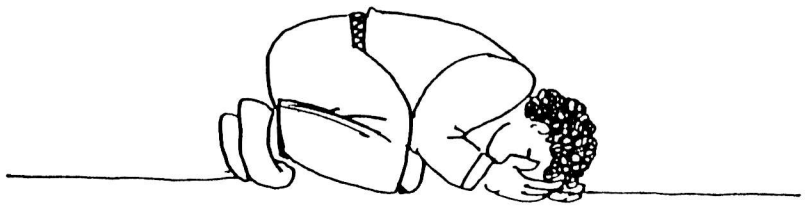
During the Liturgy, we can't help noticing this presence.

When the Holy Gifts are carried through the church, the crowd separates for them, and everyone bows deeply as they pass.

It doesn't matter that they are covered with a **veil**; we still recognize their holiness - even before they are consecrated!



In the Presanctified Liturgy and the Typika, we even fall down on our faces in adoration, because these Gifts have already been sanctified, and Jesus passes among us in his Body.

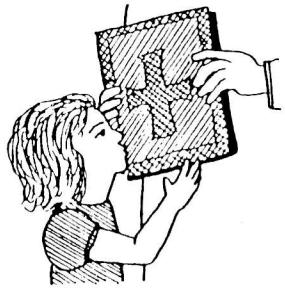


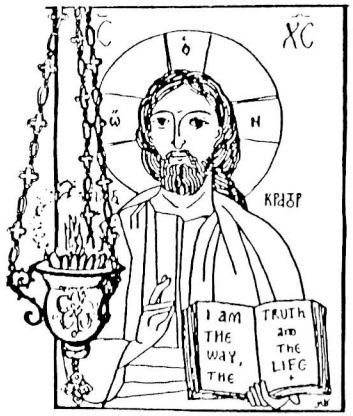
It doesn't matter that he is hidden under a **veil**. We recognize him. Even if we didn't, the words of the Liturgy would tell us.

So this mystery of the presence of Jesus, **veiled** under the sign of bread, is not strange to us.

We even recognize the presence of Jesus in **other** ways.

When the **Gospel book** is brought out, we kiss it; we venerate it because it brings God's presence to us. Jesus is present in his Word.





And lamps are lit in front of the **icons,** for he reveals himself here also. The icons bring us into the presence of God. We even kiss them and bow before them.

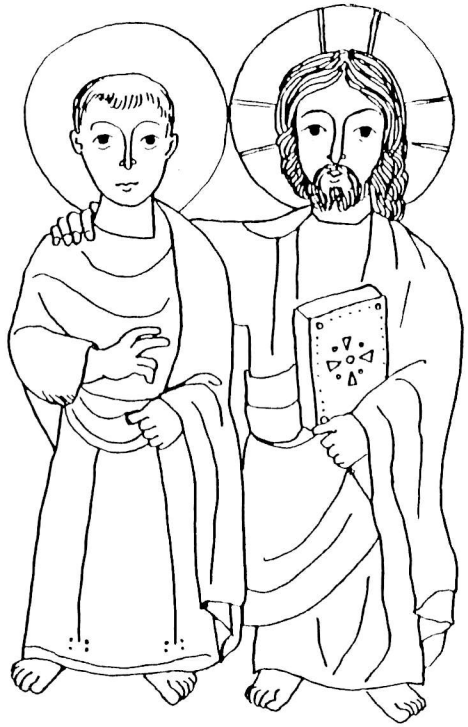
During the Liturgy, the priest bows to **us** and incenses us, just as he incenses the icons and the altar. We bow to him in turn.



This isn't just politeness!

(explanation)→

We **recognize** the presence of God in each other, the image of God in which we are made.



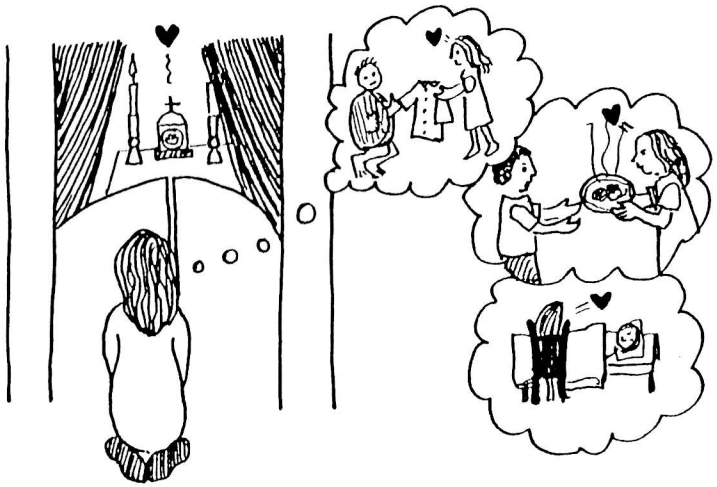
It's the same at the Kiss of Peace; when we say, "Christ is among us", we don't mean only in the Gifts on the altar... we mean in each other, too.

And this is touching the heart of the mystery, of the sacrament.

If we have all these ways of adoring the presence of Jesus, why add one more? Why place ourselves in front of the silent presence in the artophore?

Are we just wasting time we could make better use of?

We could be feeding the hungry...
clothing the naked...
visiting the sick...

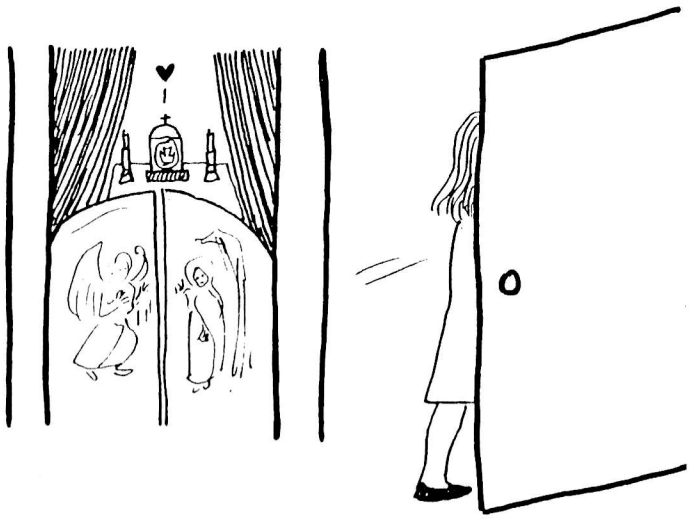


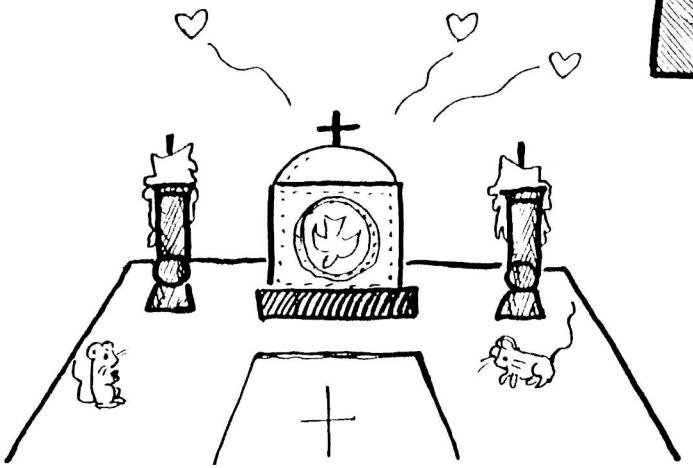


For us at Pain de Vie, this silent presence leads us to the very heart of our vocation.

There we discover a presence, not of glory, with candles, music, incense, and processions...

... but rather a presence of
poverty,
and even of loneliness...
a presence which keeps watch.



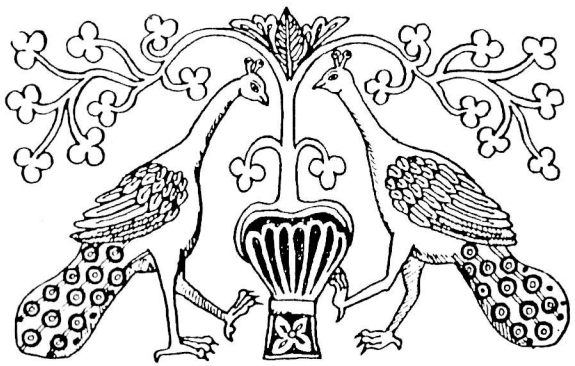


Here he is, he who made himself poor for our sake. How much poorer could he become than to remain here, day after day, night after night?

He is here, as he was on the Cross, for only one reason...
his love for us.

His love does not force itself upon us, but waits. Such is our God... he becomes small and poor for us; he stays with us; he waits for us.

He wants us to come to him freely; not out of fear, not because he is strong enough to compel us... he wants this gentle, humble presence to teach us who he really is, and teach us to respond to him with our own love.



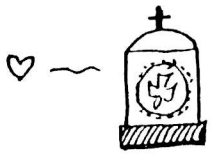
In fact, the presence of God, **veiled** in this way ~ in a piece of bread, hidden in a box ~ **reveals** to us who our God is...

... a God who is total gift, who pours out to us all he is.

And if we learn to penetrate this **veil** and recognize him here, we will be led to see him in other places too...

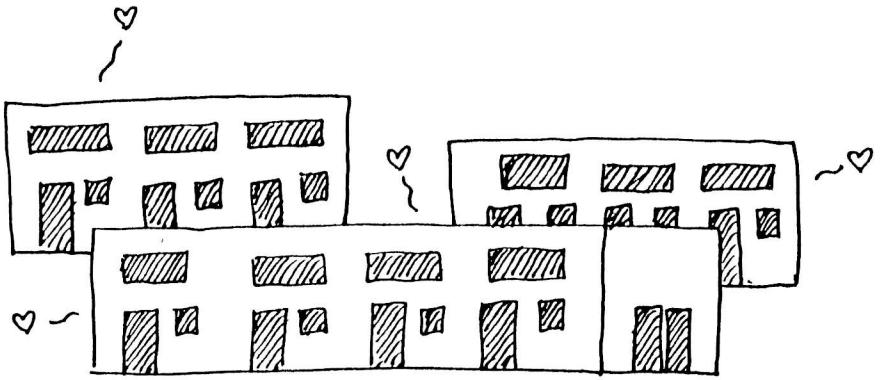
... not only in the Liturgy, and in places that are even more obscure than the Reserved Sacrament.

What could be more obscure than this?



It's true, we will be led to discover another presence...

he has more hiding places!

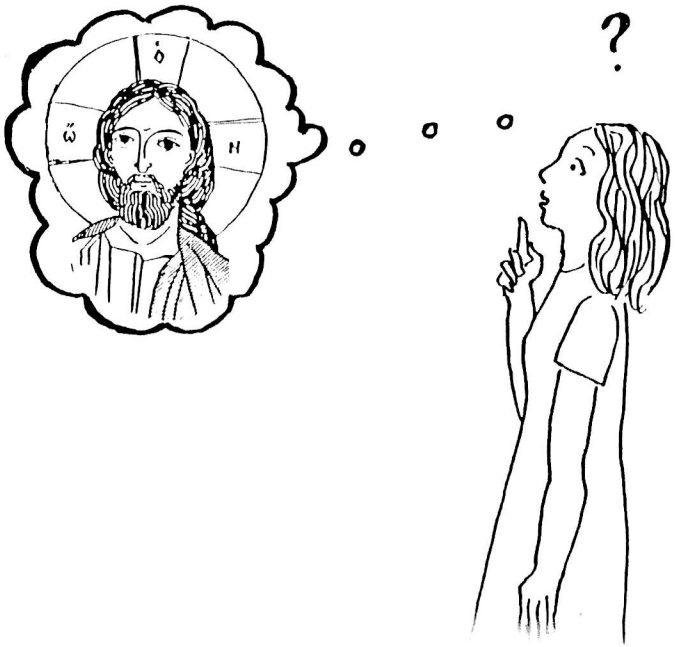


... the housing project;
... the mall;
... the street;
... my neighbour.





No one lights a candle to alert us to this presence! No one holds it out for us to kiss! There is no Liturgy with a song to warn us... no one bows down in reverence, when Jesus passes by under this veil!



This **veil** is the body of the poor.

This veil is the flesh of our brothers and sisters... the ones who stand next to us in church, and the ones who hang around outside... the ones who drink, who take drugs, who are violent to themselves and others... who are hard to get to know...

....whom we don't really want to know...



The ones who are poor, who are humble...

the ones who are imprisoned in so many ways...

the ones who are helpless and vulnerable...

the ones we don't notice...

the ones we don't understand...

Don't they resemble in so many ways this God of ours who is humble and poor, who has given away the use of his power, who just waits?

... doesn't he dwell within each one?



The truth is, that even if we give ourselves in service, even if we give our whole lives to these brothers and sisters of ours, it becomes too much for us.

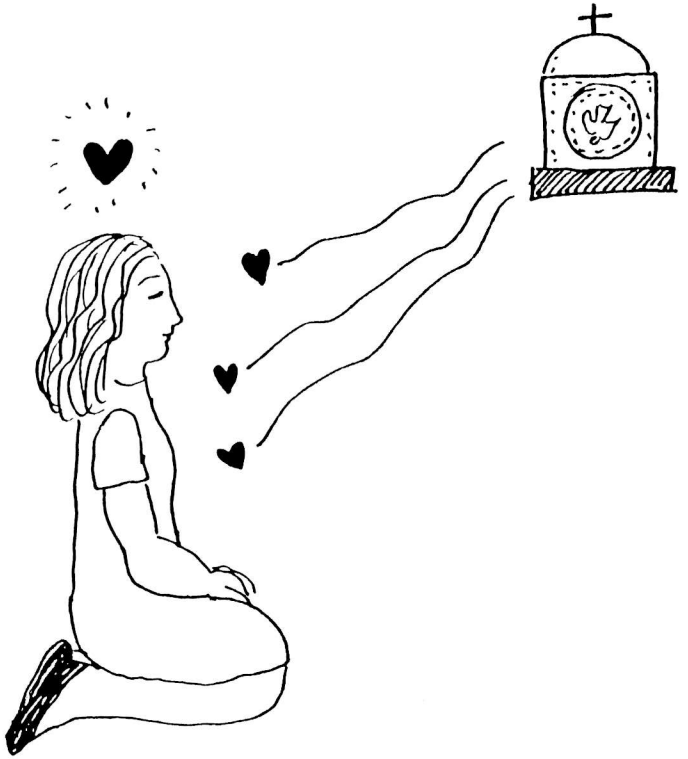
We are so weak, and can't love perfectly. We get discouraged, angry, resentful, even frightened...



If we go and say all these things to him...

what then?

Then, we will have come to an eternal source of love. A love that embraces all of who we are... a love that embraces **all.** Little by little, he will fill our hearts with his love, a love which is not from us, but which is for us and for others... a love which renews in us a love for others.



"~ Lord, tell us where you are staying!"

"~ come and see!"

(Jn. 1. 38-39)

