WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN...

My brother says he feels closer to God on a fishing trip than in Church

THE QUESTION:

My brother says he feels closer to God when he’s out on a fishing trip than he does in a church, and doesn’t see why he should bother going to Mass. WHAT CAN I SAY?

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Your initial response should be to affirm positively and without reservation that God can be experienced on a fishing trip. In fact, God is present everywhere. We call this the omnipresence of God. This means God is not confined by location, time, or even dimension.

This does not mean that God is everything — that would be a doctrine called pantheism. God is not everything, but our God is everywhere.

Then, you might want to deepen your understanding of your brother’s experience of God when he is fishing. In other words, you should engage your brother to get him talking. For example, you could ask him: What does feeling closer to God mean to you? Are there certain moments during a fishing trip when you feel closer to God? What are you doing at those moments? What feelings do you experience at those moments?
When we receive the body and blood of Christ, we enjoy an intimacy with Christ that surpasses any other that is available to us in this life. And this degree of experiencing God’s presence is only available to us in the Mass.

The answers to these questions can help you identify the reasons he may not be feeling the same connection to God in a church. They might also reveal your brother’s expectations about where God can be encountered, as well as his expectations about the Mass. If his expectations about the Mass are unrealistic, then you have an opportunity to dialogue with your brother about what one can properly expect from the Mass.

A MATTER OF DEGREE

Again, there is no doubt that God can be encountered on a fishing trip. If you are going to talk in-depth with your brother about this topic, consider doing it after you’ve accompanied him on a fishing trip. As we explored last time, silence is golden when it comes to hearing the voice of God, and silence is a key component of any successful fishing trip. In addition, any activity or place capable of opening us up to an awareness centered on God can create an environment conducive to an experience of closeness with God.

At the same time, there are different degrees of presence. For example, when you are thinking of your brother, he is present to you to a certain degree for he is in your thoughts. However, when you speak to your brother over the phone, he is present to you to a different degree as you are hearing his voice and actually interacting with him rather than simply relating to the thought of him. Now think about when you see your brother in person and are able to actually embrace him. In such a moment, your brother is present to you in a deeper, more intimate way than before.

In the same way, we can experience different degrees of God’s presence. We might experience God alone on a fishing trip. We might experience God when two or more persons are gathered in Jesus’ name. (cf Mt 18:20) There really is no limit to where we can experience the presence of the God who loves us. So the question becomes: what is so special about the Mass and how might it differ in degree?

IT’S ABOUT COMMUNION

Our God is a Trinitarian communion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were created to share eternally in this communion. We do this here and now by being of the same mind, same love, same thought and same heart (cf. Phil 2:2) as Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do this by keeping Christ’s commands.

For example, Jesus told us when we pray to say the Lord’s Prayer. We call this the perfect prayer precisely because Jesus taught it to us word-for-word, and Jesus only taught what he heard from the Father. So, when we pray the Our Father as instructed by Christ, we know by faith that we are of the same mind and thought of the Father. In other words, we are in communion with the Holy Trinity in a profound way and to a substantial degree.

Now consider the Eucharist. The priest says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world…” We respond, “Lord, we are not worthy … but only say the word and our soul shall be healed (made one, whole, saved).” Now who is the Word? The same Christ who takes away the sin of the world, or who takes away that which breaks communion with God.

This moment of communion is the very definition of feeling close to God. What’s more, when we receive the body and blood of Christ, we enjoy an intimacy with Christ that surpasses any other that is available to us in this life. And this degree of experiencing God’s presence is only available to us in the Mass, the same Mass to which you can invite your brother. And then invite him to breakfast to talk further about the many ways in which God is present in your lives.