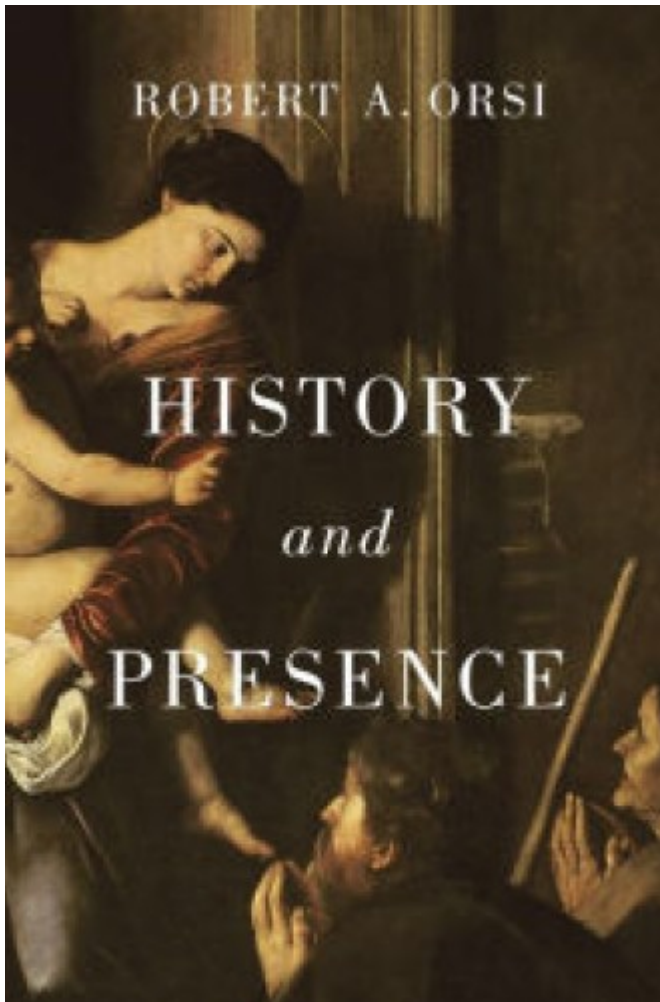


History and Presence, by Robert A. Orsi

Books in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue

In Review



History and Presence

By Robert A. Orsi
Harvard University Press

History of religion meets ethnography in this complex, intriguing account of Catholic devotional practices. Orsi, who teaches at Northwestern University, operates on several levels at once. He compellingly recounts stories of people encountering the

divine in the midst of trauma and upheaval, including survivors of clergy sexual abuse. He postulates a theory of divine presence to be used by historians of religion. He reflects on the role of writing history. But there's also a surprising pastoral force to the book. "It is a dreadful thing to be in relationship with the gods really present." The closer we come to what is most real, the more our doubts and certainties arise. Yet, the terror of being held by God draws us into community with one another—and in such community we may also find real presence.