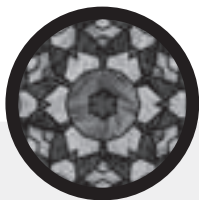


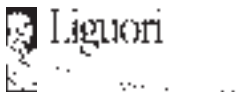
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In the *Presence*



THE SPIRITUALITY
OF EUCHARISTIC
ADORATION

Sr. Joan Ridley, OSB



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Chapter One

Ancient and Essential Meanings

A woman walked into a church and wondered what was going on. In silence, fifteen or twenty persons were sitting or kneeling in various places throughout the body of the church. There were several who looked college age, and some were elderly. Several were black and several Asian. One person was kneeling in the aisle up front. There was no service going on, but something had their attention. What was it? Then she noticed on the altar the large white host in a gold frame, positioned over a chalice. Those who were praying demonstrated that there was more here than met the eye. She asked someone what was happening and was told this was adoration of Christ in the Eucharist.

Indeed, there is more here than meets the eye. When we sit in silence in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, we are being gazed upon by the Lord. Actually this is true

every moment of our lives, but in church or chapel, we have intentionality in gazing at the Lord. That is why we are there. It is an experience of adoration. We do not have to be rationally aware of this reality. It does not depend on our mind so much as our heart.

Adoration

Adoration is our fundamental stance before God, the essential act of relating ourselves to the Absolute. It involves worship. We worship and adore God alone. “But, in what exactly does adoration consist and how is it manifested? Adoration may be prepared by long reflection, but it ends with an intuition, and, like every intuition, it does not last long. It is the perception of the grandeur, majesty, and beauty of God, together with his goodness and presence, which takes one’s breath away” (Cantalamesa, *This is My Body*). In Jesus, God became human. We adore him in the sacrament of his Body and Blood. (See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2096–2097 and 2628.)

Scripture

The earliest scriptural allusion to God dwelling with us might be the concept of the *shekhinah*, wherein God’s presence remained with the people. In biblical Hebrew, *shekhinah* is used to denote the dwelling or settling presence of God,

especially in the Temple in Jerusalem, and also God's presence which traveled with the people (Exodus 40:38—cloud by day, fire by night; see Leviticus 9:23 and Numbers 14:10). This goes very far back in religious history—these early instances of God “dwelling” with the people were 1,500 to 2,000 years before Christ.

In Roman Catholic tradition, we reserve the Blessed Sacrament in a tabernacle. The English word “tabernacle” is derived from the Latin word *tabernaculum*, meaning “tent, hut, booth.” The Hebrew word for tabernacle, *mishcan*, is also used in the sense of dwelling place, as in Psalm 132:5: “Till I find a home for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.”

God is present everywhere, yet specific holy places are important—places where God's extended or universal presence in all creation becomes perceptible to us. The tabernacle is a point of permanent contact with the Sacred. Like Jacob's ladder (see Genesis 28:12), it joins heaven and earth. Heaven is not so much a place as it is God's transcendent realm penetrating our world—most intensely where the risen Christ is present in the praying and celebrating community—in the sacraments, the Eucharist, and acts of selfless love.

Jesus came to give us Life and to give it abundantly (see John 10:10). At the celebration of Eucharist, we receive and eat the Body and Blood of the Lord and adore that which we receive. Outside of the time of Mass, we adore the permanent presence of Christ that is outside ourselves. Both

aspects have a scriptural foundation. Compare John 6:54 (“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life...”) with John 6:40 (“For it is my Father’s will that everyone who looks upon the Son and puts his faith in him shall possess eternal life...”).

God increases our desire by feeding us on many levels. Seeing and eating both increase our longing. In the book of Sirach we hear: “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill. Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more” (Sirach 24:19, 21 NRSV).

As Jesus prepared for his passion, he prayed and invited his disciples to “Abide in me as I abide in you” (John 15:4 NRSV). Jesus abides with the Church throughout time—in the celebration of the Eucharist (Mass) and in the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle; more generally, where two or three are gathered in his name.

There are many passages in Scripture with eucharistic symbolism: Moses bows down and takes off his shoes (adoration) before the bush that does not burn; Isaiah receives a burning coal which cleanses his lips (purification); Elijah eats bread baked under the ashes (nourishment); Simeon receives into his arms the child whom he has longed for (desire); Zaccheus heeds Jesus’ request: “I must come to your house” (invitation, welcome, risk, conversion); Thomas touches the wounds of Christ (he sees and believes).

As we encounter Christ in the Eucharist, we are gradually

“conformed” to Christ who is taking shape in us (Galatians 4:19). How does this grace occur? Perhaps it is something like osmosis—the imperceptible movement and gradual assimilation of one thing into another. The Word takes root in us, dwelling in our hearts. In the sacraments, we absorb the attitudes and mind of Christ.

Early Church

The early Church acted on the belief that Christ’s presence endured and was not limited to the time of the celebration. This was evident when those present would take the eucharistic bread home for family unable to attend because of illness, or for reception of Communion during the week. Over the course of history, many specific practices involving the Blessed Sacrament emerged, further reflecting this belief in the enduring presence. Chapter Two will explore those practices.

Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century wrote: “Our God Jesus Christ is all the more visible now that he is with the Father.” In the fourth and fifth centuries, Saints John Chrysostom and Augustine argued that if the Eucharist is truly the full, real presence of Jesus Christ, and Christ is God, the sacrament deserves the same adoration as we give to God.

The Eucharist is a reversal of expected realities. Normally we assimilate what we eat into our body. Saint Augustine

had an experience of prayer wherein Christ said to him: “It is not you (human) who assimilate me (Christ) but it will be I who assimilate you” (*Confessions*). In this eucharistic reversal, the eater becomes the eaten. We are assimilated to the body, mind, and will of Christ and to that of his Mystical Body. (See 1 Corinthians 6:17.)

Framing a Question

For the first theologians in the Church, adoration was not worship of the inactive body of the Lord (as if it was an object or a thing), but always involved the action of our being taken up into Christ’s offering of himself to the Father in the event of his death-resurrection. At times we have forgotten this. Any of us might ask the rhetorical questions posed by Rev. James Moroney, executive director of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy: “Isn’t eucharistic adoration a relic of a pre-conciliar spirituality which de-emphasizes participation for [visual] observation? Isn’t eucharistic worship more akin to private devotionism rather than public liturgical celebration?” The answer, as Father Moroney went on to write, is that yes, eucharistic adoration is a devotion—that is, not a sacrament. But it is a devotion rooted firmly in the liturgy, which can strengthen the liturgical and spiritual life of the parish. This realization has evolved in the Church over time and is evolving still. Chapters Two, Three, Six, and Seven will explain the value and practices of adoration.

The great theologian, Karl Rahner, SJ, summed up the direction of the Church's gradual expansion of understanding in *The Eucharist: The Mystery of Our Christ*:

Because the Church knows that in this reserved sacrament the Lord is truly and substantially present in flesh and blood, in body and soul, in divinity and humanity, she has increasingly learned to venerate this sacrament of her Lord and to worship it, to embrace it with devotion and love....

Just as we humans know someone more deeply after years of interacting with them, so the Church gradually expanded her appreciation for the reserved sacrament of Christ's body.

Some years ago, as Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI gave a series of homilies on the Eucharist that reflect his deep spirituality. Considering the Church's experience and growth in appreciation of all dimensions of Eucharist, in *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, Heart of Life*, he said:

The Lord gave himself in bread and wine. Those are things we eat. It was said that the bread is there not to be gazed upon but to be eaten. This is essentially right. But let us just recall: What does that mean, to receive the Lord? That is never just a physical, bodily act, as when I eat a slice of bread. So it can therefore never be something that happens just in a moment. To receive Christ means: to move toward him, to

adore him. For that reason, the reception can stretch out beyond the time of the Eucharistic celebration; indeed, it has to do so.

The more the Church grew into the Eucharistic mystery, the more she understood that she could not consummate the celebration of Communion within the limited time available in the Mass. When, thus, the eternal light was lit in the church, and the tabernacle installed beside the altar, then it was as if the bud of the mystery had opened, and the Church had welcomed the fullness of the eucharistic mystery.

GOD IS NEAR US: THE EUCHARIST, HEART OF LIFE

This breathtaking quote shows that for us individually and for the Church as a whole, adoration of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament expresses the gradually acquired fullness of Eucharist. This is also expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1379. Adoration complements and deepens the effects of Eucharist in those who adore. Adoration is not unimportant or easily discarded. Having said that, it is also true that understandings about adoration of the Eucharist have changed over the years as the Church gradually learned to venerate the sacrament of the Lord. In the following chapters, we will look at the ebb and flow of practices throughout history, including the practice of perpetual adoration and contemporary forms of adoration.