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CONTEMPLATING THE EUCHARISTIC FORM OF CHRIST

By Fr. John Colacino, C.P.P.S.

What exactly do the bishops of the United States hope for in their “Eucharistic revival” initiative? That might at first seem obvious. But is it? From some time now, I have been concerned about a seeming imbalance in approaches to the Eucharist I have seen in various venues. It began years ago when I happened to catch the end of a Mass on EWTN. As is their custom, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament took place immediately following the liturgy. At that time the Sacrament was exposed by an automatic curtain which rose to reveal a monstrance—contrary to any liturgical directive I am aware that requires an actual minister to perform this action. This was accompanied by a commentator who said the following in so many words: “The purpose of the Mass is to reserve and adore the Blessed Sacrament.” I was astounded that a media outlet that prides itself on its orthodoxy could have someone in its employ make such an uninformed statement.

Another sign of imbalance I have noted with some dismay is the tendency in Catholic publications to picture the consecrated Host in a monstrance in articles about the Eucharist -- as if the first reference to the Sacrament in the minds of people ought to be Eucharistic devotion outside of Mass rather than its actual liturgical celebration. This invariably reinforces the error made by the EWTN commentator.

These tendencies have been well-described by Fr. Louis Cameli of the Archdiocese of Chicago:

The heavy emphasis that [the National Eucharistic Revival] places on eucharistic devotions, such as processions, adoration, Forty Hours and eucharistic miracles—as praiseworthy as these might be in themselves—does not capture the

heart of the matter. The real challenge is not to understand, appreciate and reverence the Eucharist as a sacramental object, which can be a real tendency of eucharistic devotions. No, the real challenge is to enter together the mystery of the Lord’s self-sacrificing love made present and communicated in the eucharistic action—take, eat, drink, do, remember. To enter that mystery is to find ourselves individually and collectively transformed into the very one we celebrate, Jesus who is present among us as our hope of glory.... [Devotions] can lead us to the eucharistic action, and they can lead from it and, in a certain sense, prolong it. In neither case, however, can they substitute for the eucharistic action itself or claim an absolute value in Christian life (*America*; March 21, 2023).

Now lest anyone think at this point that I hold anything less than the full Catholic faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist—his humanity and divinity “really, truly and substantially” present as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it—rest assured that I do. Nor am I in any way opposed to Eucharistic adoration and devotion. Anyone who knows me knows that I have promoted this throughout my priesthood, most notably at the Chapel of St. Gaspar in Toronto. I have, moreover, for many decades been in the habit of making a daily Eucharistic Holy Hour. In doing so, however, I am aware of the liturgical directives governing the practice:

Exposition of the holy eucharist, either in the ciborium or in the monstrance, is intended to acknowledge Christ’s marvellous presence in the sacrament. Exposition invites us to the spiritual union with him that culminates in sacramental

communion. Thus it fosters very well the worship which is due to Christ in spirit and in truth. This kind of exposition must clearly express the cult [viz. worship] of the blessed sacrament in its relationship to the Mass. The plan of the exposition should carefully avoid anything which might somehow obscure the principal desire of Christ in instituting the eucharist, namely, to be with us as food, medicine, and comfort. (*Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass*; 1973, no. 51).

Which brings me back to the theological and doctrinal imbalance I mentioned earlier. The tradition of the Church is virtually unanimous that what is signified and effected by the celebration of the Eucharist is the unity of the Church. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas, following the patristic tradition he inherited, taught that the true Body and Blood of Christ sacramentally present brings about the mystical, or ecclesial, Body of Christ. The conversion of the elements of bread and wine achieve their purpose, so to speak, when those gathered are themselves converted into the Body of Christ—the Church—newly united to their Head and to one another by their eating and drinking the one Bread and one Cup. In Thomas' words, “We enter into communion with Christ through the Eucharist; we share in his Flesh and in his Godhead; we enter into communion and are mutually united by it” (ST, III q. 79, a. 1).

Of course, in order for this to have an impact on those present for a given celebration of the Eucharist, the sacred liturgy needs to be of a commensurate quality. All of the elements which comprise the liturgical action must speak to this Mystery of the whole Christ, Head and members. This includes the beauty of the surroundings, the excellence of the music and preaching, the skill of the liturgical ministers who preside, proclaim and serve the gathered assembly so that all might truly engage in that participation called for by the Second Vatican Council. I have often thought how all such persons should be required on an annual basis—perhaps prior to the First Sunday of Advent and the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ—to review together some portion of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* as well as the *Introduction to the Lectionary* to see where their celebrations are or are not in accord with the mind and directives of the Church. I fear too many accommodations are made under the guise of “pastoral needs” which only serve to obscure and diminish the sacred mysteries. It seems to me an authentic Eucharistic revival has to begin

and end with a thoroughgoing liturgical revival or else I fear the bishops' initiative will be for naught.

As for the appropriate and sound practice of Eucharistic adoration, may I suggest supplementing our language with another phrase which I am borrowing from a fellow Missionary of the Precious Blood, the late Fr. Ernest Rally, who published a series of reflections for use in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament entitled *Eucharistic Contemplation* (Liturgical Press, 2003). To “contemplate the Eucharistic form of Christ” is to encounter in silence and awe the Body broken and the Blood outpoured given for us in the Paschal Mystery and sacramentally present under the Species of bread and wine. With a minimum of words and in the silence the Real Presence evokes, we behold in a contemplative gaze what during the liturgy is shown to us “in motion,” namely, the consecration, the elevation and the invitation to Communion. Those moments in the liturgical action are “freeze-framed” so to speak so we can reflect at length on the words, “This is my Body, this is my Blood”.... “Through him, with him and in him,” and “Behold the Lamb of God.” But this is no idle contemplation; the Eucharistic Form of Christ makes corresponding demands on us. We are challenged to go forth from a time of adoring contemplation to engage in various forms of Eucharistic action wherein our own bodies become food for others, broken if necessary, and our own blood given for the life of the world, poured out if need be. Or as St. Augustine taught, “This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God” (*City of God* X,6).

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