

The Real Presence at the heart of Eucharistic devotion

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The conclusion of an intellectual endeavour must always, at the same time, be a beginning. Whether it involves a deeper understanding of familiar truths or new perspectives on familiar contexts, everything enables the individual – whether author or reader of studies on spirituality – to better appreciate the heights to which human thought can ascend, but also the gifts of divine revelation. And that was indeed the aim of our conference. The sublime good of the Holy Eucharist and the many forms in which it is venerated should not be inert objects of purely theoretical and objective interest; they should be studied as a living source of renewal for ecclesial life. Undoubtedly, the organisers and participants of this year's symposium had, from the outset, the common aim of rescuing from oblivion the treasures of the liturgy that the Church has developed over the centuries under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and of shedding light on them through scholarly research grounded in faith. It is only to the extent that the liturgical and theological riches of the Eucharistic worship remain known in their fullness that they can prevent the forms of church life dedicated to Almighty God from becoming impoverished.

I do not think I am going too far in saying that, once again this year, this objective has been achieved. The wide range of topics covered, the in-depth study of specific issues by the various speakers, the active participation of the audience, and, of course, the numerous conversations that took place on the fringes of our meeting bear witness to the fact that it is futile to claim, as some do, that the classical liturgy is sterile. On the contrary, it must be affirmed that, insofar as we have properly assimilated what has been presented here, the multiplicity of theological, liturgical, historical and musicological elements inherent precisely in the veneration of the Most Holy Sacrament will undoubtedly enrich and bear fruit in the intellectual and spiritual lives of us all. Despite the great and remarkable diversity of their aspects, the wide range of themes covered here does not prevent us from recognising a common thread: whether in the presentations focusing more on points of doctrine, such as the fascinating study presented to us by Bishop Lagrange, the local ordinary, on Eucharistic veneration in the life of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II, or the Church's responses to Eucharistic heresies presented by Fr Clément, the doctrine of the encyclical *Mediator Dei* expounded by Mr Graf, or the studies on the history of the liturgy by Fr Quoëx, Fr Chanut, and Fr

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Folsom and Fr. Lugmayr, the reflections of Fr. de Margerie and Fr. Wladimir-Marie de Saint-Jean on pastoral theology, or the historical and musicological reflections of Mr Davies and Prof. Boogaarts. All these enriching and impressive works nevertheless highlight, beyond the multitude and great diversity of the information presented and the facts set out, a fundamental common thread that the Church has cherished throughout the centuries and which must not disappear now.

Indeed, it is evident that everything the Church has done to establish a proper worship of the Eucharist is inspired by the realisation that, by nature, man is destined to venerate and worship the presence of the one true God. When this Divinity is present, the Church must, in all the forms she employs, lead man to the reverence which alone guarantees the worship rightly due to God. This is the purpose of all forms, of all theological reflection, and of the whole of worship. And when the object of our worship—the necessity of which the Church, in the course of history, has recognised ever more clearly—is no longer the Eucharist, then man loses his very substance. The Church pursues but one goal: to lead all people to the ultimate form of eschatological worship, in which we are promised that “we shall see God as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). The mysterious splendour of what this definitive eternal existence—for which God created us—will be is found, undiminished, in Eucharistic adoration, in the sacrifice of the Mass, in Holy Communion, and in the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. All this points towards adoration in an eternal homage. That is why, by way of conclusion to this conference, I shall take the liberty of offering a few brief reflections on this fundamental orientation of all Eucharistic worship.

I. Worship is a fundamental human disposition

Adoration is the highest form of veneration that man can attain. Of all visible creatures, only man possesses the gift of gathering his spiritual powers to concentrate them entirely on the contemplation and admiration of a superior being. Just as, in the philosophical realm, he alone possesses the curiosity from which knowledge springs, so too, in the supernatural realm, he alone is, by definition, *adorationis capax*. But, as always, man’s highest capacity corresponds to his deepest tragedy. Having, from the very beginning, brutally torn himself away from the sole object of true worship, man has fallen, from the contemplation of the infinite, into the basest form of self-absorption. And that is why, precisely because he possesses the capacity for unconditional veneration of his Creator to the point of being able to forget himself, he is subjected to manifold temptations that seek to make him take the creature as the object of the highest veneration.

And the paradigm of these temptations is found in that of Christ in the desert, where the eternal adversary seeks to lead him, to his ruin, into the worship of the creature: he “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, and said to him, ‘All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’” (Mt 4:8–9). To this, the Lord responds by recalling a passage from the Old Testament which clearly establishes the object of all worship truly worthy of man: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him alone shall you serve.” (Mt 4:10; Dt 5:9; 6:13). When man disregards this commandment—which corresponds to the deepest essence of his nature—to borrow a phrase from Chesterton: “He will worship not nothing but everything.” Either he will place his own person on the throne of his boundless worship, or he will take as the object of a mockery of worship a person or a thing, which will in truth be nothing but a reflection of his own disordered lust. When man turns away from the very centre of the human capacity for worship, a void is created which necessarily tends to be filled. Once God is no longer the object of his worship, He will be replaced by an idol. The face of this idol, which then appears worthy of worship to the blinded sinner, can take the most diverse forms. But behind it always lurks the mocking grimace of the one who triumphs because, once again, a creature has agreed to utter the cry of the original rebellion: “*Non serviam* – I will not serve.”

The worship of idols enslaves. The ruthless domination they exert over man’s spiritual faculties can reduce him to the level of an animal. He who makes himself or another creature the object of excessive worship lowers himself to the level of that creature. When diverted to the benefit of a creature, the capacity to worship God—a capacity which gives the human soul such strength to attain a natural and supernatural dimension: *anima est quodammodo omnia*—perverts the whole of man. Everything is measured by the deceptive yardstick of the object of worship. In doing so, man loses sight of the Whole, of Beauty, of Truth, of Goodness. His world shrinks; he becomes blind.

But when man cultivates true worship and thus makes God the object of this capacity of his soul, the soul expands and grows. Even the simple man, perhaps culturally or intellectually limited, can possess a great soul when he opens it to true worship. Such is the mystery of Catholic truth, which elevates man in his entirety. The way it directs his gaze towards the True, the Good and the Beautiful opens up, because then man fixes his eyes on the present being of God, because he adores Him. And thus there will develop not only his faith and the supernatural strength of his soul, but also his sensitivity to the true value of things. He who submits to the Most High and thus finds his place within the whole of the divine order will find it easier to place other things in their proper order according to the hierarchy of values created by God, and to avoid the disorder born of a pride that owes nothing to anyone. If man makes proper use of this sublime capacity of his soul, his other capacities will then be oriented in accordance with this first, fundamental one. He who has, as it were, found the ‘A’ to which

all the other notes must be adjusted will find himself in harmony with the melody of life that God intended for him. And that 'A' is precisely worship.

II. The criteria of true worship

That said, as this conference has very clearly shown, there are criteria that enable us to distinguish between true worship—that which is fitting for man and in which God liberates and elevates him—and false worship, idolatry. These criteria are evident throughout the liturgy and are particularly concentrated in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

a. "In spirit and in truth"

The Lord Himself said: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). Some of the dogmatic presentations given during this symposium were specifically intended to highlight this truth as the criterion for the proper worship of the Eucharist. The more the object of worship is illuminated by Revelation, the more deeply the worshipper will be gripped by the power of the truth emanating from that object. Thus, only he who recognises the whole truth in the object of his worship, or at least recognises it to the extent permitted by his human capacity for understanding, can truly worship. This is undoubtedly one of the significant differences between human adoration and angelic adoration, but also the difference between adoration here on earth, *in umbris et imaginibus*, and that in the eternal homeland. Nevertheless, without this radiance of truth, the intuitive perception of worship remains imperfect or even, if the error is complete, becomes entirely impossible.

b. Form and spirit

Nevertheless, worship "in spirit and in truth" cannot do without the proper form. As we have seen, the Church took a long time to establish this form, and not without difficulty; indeed, if one wishes to clothe the sublime in a setting worthy of it, everything counts: every gesture, every ornament, every step. This is the true meaning of respect for the rubrics, which is all too often confused with empty formalism or cold legalism. It is the spirit that creates the form in order to become communicable through the form. Worship of God in spirit but without form is therefore a contradiction in terms. The "formless" breeds chaos, not worship. Thus, to claim that a form can become ossified and thereby lose its spirit is a prejudice. At most, only those who make use of the form can become ossified and lose the spirit, when they no longer understand the spirit that dwells within the form and think that, by destroying the form, they will liberate the spirit. In

reality, along with the form, they also destroy the spirit, and, having lost the spirit, they can recreate neither the form nor the spirit. All that remains is chaos.

Those, on the other hand, who try to understand the spirit within the form will find themselves carried, by the form, towards the spirit. When one studies the forms of liturgical adoration of the Blessed Sacrament – as has been remarkably the case here – one eventually arrives at the spirit of adoration that emanates from them. Keeping one’s fingers joined after transubstantiation, using the paten for Communion, meticulously preparing Communion for the sick—what are all these things, if not visible gestures of tender adoration? The genuflections, of course, but also every gesture of Eucharistic adoration says, with the Apostle Thomas: “My Lord and my God!” The spirit of the liturgical form is adoration.

c. Reverence

The spirit in truth and in form is the object of reverential fear – or reverence. The philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand clearly perceived to what extent reverence is the virtue of religion par excellence, but also how inseparable it is from adoration, which is grounded in the knowledge of revealed truth: “Yet the fundamental basis [...] of right behaviour [...] towards that which is above us, towards Him who, from ‘above’, addresses us, towards the absolute, towards the realm of the supernatural, towards God, is reverence. It is the mother of all virtues, of all religion. And it is the foundation and the beginning, firstly because it is precisely this that makes our spirit capable of true knowledge. [] Only he who reveres is capable of true exaltation, [...] of true love and true obedience.” [*Liturgie und Persönlichkeit*, St Ottilien 1989, p. 43.] However, in human beings, reverence can only develop through respect for form. We are too much slaves to the senses to be able to experience a purely intellectual and spiritual reverence, in the manner of the angels, for example. Only those who adhere to form will attain reverence, which will lead them to an even deeper knowledge. It is therefore no surprise that the abolition of forms is accompanied by a lack of reverence in the way the Eucharist is treated, to the point where we are threatened by the definitive breakdown of Eucharistic truths.

Reverence—understood as respectful awe—is not fear. It is rightly said of the whole liturgy that it is a holy representation in which heaven and earth meet. Everyone has their place within it, which they must preserve and fulfil with humble respect for the forms willed by God, which protect the spirit. Insofar as a person does this with the desire to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries presented, reverence—perfected in its forms and as expressed in liturgical acts—will open up to them a knowledge so profound that it compel him to kneel in adoration. But at the same time he will see—and thus the circle is closed

– how everything else comes together in an order that commands reverence before the One who created that order, an order which, at its most intense, signifies that God Himself is present in this world. Thus, the spirit of true adoration in the liturgy enables the worshipper to discover ‘the mystery of infinite depths that dwells in every being as something that comes from the hand of God’. [*Ibid.*, p. 50.] He who reverently preserves the form of the liturgy comes not only to worship but also to understand. As in the life of the Church, liturgy and wisdom, music and art, spirit and form will converge in his life into a harmony that can already give a foretaste of what will be given to us in the hereafter.

III. Our aim

To achieve this goal, and thus to lead people to eternal worship, the Church has always strived to direct the human gift of worship in this visible world towards the one object which, on this earth, is worthy in the full sense of the term of such behaviour: Almighty God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ, present in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. The hard battles she has had to wage to affirm and deepen faith in the Real Presence have served as the foundation for a Eucharistic spirituality increasingly centred on adoration. Finally, every gesture made by the priest as he handles the Eucharistic elements, every genuflection, all the precautions taken for the distribution of Holy Communion, and all the care taken in the proper preparation of the altar—whilst serving to manifest the reverence due to God—also aim to show the Christian people clearly that not only is the Lord present, but also that, in our very attitude, we owe him a kind of concrete expression of our adoration. Just as Mary Magdalene anointed the Lord with precious ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, so too the sinful man—priest or layperson—who comes into contact with the Eucharist is bound to a *tractatio Sanctissimi* befitting his state and corresponding to the highest reverence.

To better recall this objective of the Church’s liturgy was the aim of this year’s symposium. It is not polemics or splendid isolation that will revive the spirit of reverence and adoration, but rather a deepening and wide dissemination of our understanding of it. The great merit of the organisers is that they have gone further along this path and, once again this year, have brought together authors capable of presenting and explaining to us the relationship between truth, form and reverence, thereby further promoting adoration as a fundamental attitude of Eucharistic worship. We are grateful to them all. But above all, we must give thanks to Him who has stooped down to our poverty and has not wished to withdraw from our gaze of adoration: the Almighty God, visible among us in Jesus Christ, His only Son. Those who, thanks to the papers presented during this symposium, have gained a deeper understanding of the depths of adoration—which, having come from the depths of eternity to enter this world,

unfolds in liturgical forms, will understand why I wish to conclude with these words:

Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo.