

## **Adoration of the Holy Sacrament from the *The Eucharist: Our Sanctification* by Raniero Cantalamessa**

The highest form of Eucharistic contemplation is the silent adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. It is true that Jesus-Eucharist can be contemplated from afar, in the tabernacle of the mind. (St. Francis used to say: “When I don’t hear Mass, I adore the Body of Christ in mental prayer; and I worship just as much as when I see it at Mass.”) Nevertheless, contemplation done in the real presence of Christ, before the species containing him, possibly in a quiet place filled, as it were, with his presence, is a great help to us.

In his letter of Holy Thursday 1980 on “The Mystery and Cult of the Most Holy Sacrament,” Pope John Paul II wrote: “The adoration of Christ in the Sacrament of Love must be expressed in different ways of Eucharistic devotion: personal prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, hours of adoration, and expositions that can be either short, long or yearly . . . The animation and study of the Eucharistic cult are proof of the genuine renewal aimed at by the council and they are its central point. . . . Jesus awaits us in the Sacrament of Love. Let us find time to meet him in faith-filled adoration and contemplation.” A reminder of this sort was necessary. Traditional Eucharistic devotion was, in fact, quite neglected in the fervor of liturgical renewal which, naturally, is more concerned with the community and ceremonial aspect than with personal devotion. It was also neglected through a certain naïve, exaggerated, sociological and secular trend that saw only the convivial or so to say, the horizontal aspect of the Eucharist. The centrifugal movement (towards the poor, politics, underdeveloped countries, etc.), which was characteristic of many Christian communities after the council, now needs to be counterbalanced by a centripetal movement to lead us back to the heart of the Church, where the Eucharist abides.

‘Worship and adoration of the Eucharist outside Mass is relatively new in Christian devotion. In fact, it started to develop in the West at the beginning of the eleventh century as a reaction to

the heresy of Berengar of Tours who denied the “real” presence, claiming that Jesus was only symbolically present in the Eucharist. Since then, however, we can say that there has not been a saint in whose life Eucharistic devotion has not been a determining factor. It has been the source of great spiritual energy, a sort of home fire that is always burning in God’s house where all the great sons and daughters of the church have warmed themselves.

Perhaps this relatively late development of Eucharistic worship outside Mass indicates that a certain freedom should be allowed to all Christian denominations on this point. Eucharistic devotion is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Catholic Church which she must gratefully cultivate for other Christians too, without, however, necessarily expecting them to do the same. Every important spiritual movement within Christianity has had its own particular charism to contribute to the richness of the whole Church. Protestants have the cult of God’s Word: the Orthodox Church has the cult of icons (and what a lot we Catholics have received from them in this!). The Catholic Church has the Eucharist. The same fundamental aim is realized in all three ways—the contemplation of Christ and of his mystery.

In this sense I say the Eucharist makes the Church through contemplation. IT is by staying still, in silence, and possibly for long periods, before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, that we perceive what he wants from us, put aside our own plans to make way for his, and let God’s light gradually penetrate the heart and heal it. It is a time when there is a great need for Eucharistic adoration and for staying, like Mary of Bethany, at the Master’s feet (cf Luke 10:39).

What is the precise meaning of Eucharistic contemplation? In itself, it is really the ability, or better, the gift, of establishing a heart-to-heart contact with Jesus really present in the Host and, through him, of raising oneself to the Father in the Holy Spirit. All of this is done, as far as possible, in a state of outer and inner silence. Silence is the dearest spouse of contemplation; it protects it, as Joseph protected Mary. To contemplate is to intuitively fix the mind on the divine reality (this could be God himself, or one of his attributes, or a

mystery in Christ's life) and relish his presence. In meditation the *search* for truth prevails while, in contemplation, *delight* in the found truth prevails.

Great spiritual masters have given us definitions of contemplation: "a free, penetrating and still gaze" (Hugh of St. Victor), or: "A loving look at God" (St. Bonaventure). In the parish of Ars there was once a peasant who used to pass hours in church, immobile, looking at the tabernacle, and when the Saint Curate of Ars asked him what he was doing there every day like that, he replied: "Nothing, I look at him and he looks at me!" This tells us that Christian contemplation is never a one-way gaze and neither is it directed at the "Nothing" (as in certain Oriental religions, in particular Buddhism). It is always the meeting of two looks; our look at God and God's look at us. If, at times, our gaze weakens, God's never does. Sometimes Eucharistic contemplation just means keeping Jesus company, being there under his gaze, giving him the joy of contemplating us, too. Although we are but useless creatures and sinners, we are still the fruit of his passion for whom he gave his life.

Eucharistic contemplation is not, therefore, hindered by any arid empty state that can be experienced, whether this is due to our own dissipation or permitted by God for our purification. We simply have to give it a meaning, even renouncing the satisfaction that fervor gives us, to praise God and say with Charles de Foucauld: "To please you, Jesus, that is all I want!"; that is to say: all I want is that you should be pleased. Jesus can dispose of eternity to make us happy—we have only this short space of time to make him happy. How could we resign ourselves to missing a chance that will never occur again for all eternity? At times Eucharistic adoration may simply seem to be a pure waste of time—we gaze and see nothing. Instead, what strength and proof of our faith it holds! Jesus knows we could leave and busy ourselves with a thousand other more gratifying things, but we stay there, simply giving him our time. When we cannot pray with our minds we can always do so with our bodies and that is prayer of the body (even if the mind is anything but absent).

"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exod 34:29). Moses did not know and neither shall we (for it is well so). But maybe it will happen even to us after one of those moments, that someone will see our face shining because we have contemplated the Lord. It would indeed be the most wonderful gift we could give them.