

# A History of Eucharistic Spirituality

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## Introduction:

“Eucharistic spirituality” = How we in the Church understand, experience and celebrate Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

Although the Church has believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist from its earliest days, the expression of that belief has taken on many different forms over the centuries. The Mass itself has evolved in response to changes in Eucharistic spirituality. New forms of adoration *outside* of Mass have also developed over time.

The source for this historical overview is a recent book entitled *Eucharistic Adoration after Vatican II*, by Edward Foley, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2022.

## 1<sup>st</sup> century:

St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, shows us how the Church thought about Eucharist in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. He describes the celebration of the Eucharist as a source of unity among Christians. The community of believers *becomes* the Body of Christ through their sharing in the Eucharistic sacrifice and their reception of Christ’s Body and Blood in the sacrament.

Since the Eucharistic celebration was considered a sacred *meal*, all of the bread and wine that was consecrated was meant to be consumed by those present. Everyone would receive Holy Communion, because that is what made them one with Christ and with each other.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> century:

The 2<sup>nd</sup> century provides the first evidence of the Eucharistic elements being shared outside of the Mass where they were consecrated. The purpose was to unite people who could not be present at the same liturgy.

- Consecrated bread was shared with members of the community who could not be physically present at Mass, due to illness, for example.
- Consecrated bread from one Christian community was shared with other communities to foster unity and respect among the churches.

## 4<sup>th</sup> century:

The 4<sup>th</sup> century provides the first evidence of the Blessed Sacrament being reserved outside of Mass, in *private residences*, so that people who could not participate regularly in Mass could receive Holy Communion on their own.

- Some ascetics living in the Egyptian desert kept consecrated bread in their hermitages, so that they would not have to leave their solitude.
- In some places, lay people received permission to store the Eucharist in their homes, probably because Mass was not always available in their area.

The reserved Eucharistic elements were typically stored in some type of cabinet or closet. However, these forerunners to tabernacles were *not* a focus of adoration while the Blessed Sacrament was present.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries:**

Catechists of this period began to emphasize reverence for Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament. The Mass was modified to encourage the faithful to approach Holy Communion with the proper disposition. The celebrant lifted up the consecrated host and the chalice of the Precious Blood to show them to the people just before they came forward to receive Holy Communion. Note, however, that the host and chalice were *not* elevated at the time of consecration. The only moment of "adoration" during the Mass was immediately prior to receiving Holy Communion.

Some examples of catechetical instruction from this period:

- St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) instructed the newly initiated to receive Communion in this way: make your left hand a "throne" for the right hand in order to receive Christ, "the King."
- St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) urged Christians to "follow the Magi," offering adoration to Christ when they came to the Eucharistic table to receive him.
- St. Augustine (d. 430) said that one should not eat the Lord's flesh without first adoring it.

With this new emphasis on reverence for Christ in the Eucharist, the Church's teaching about Eucharist was beginning to evolve. Up to this point, "communion" with Christ in the sacrament of the altar had meant two things:

1. participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection
2. unity with one's fellow Christians, who also belong to the "Body of Christ"

Now, a third element was being added. The concept of "communion" also included a *personal connection with the living Christ*, present in the Eucharist. Hence, the faithful were encouraged to recognize and reverence Christ in the sacrament as they came forward to receive him.

Some looming dangers:

- During the medieval period to come, the personal connection with Christ would become the *singular* focus of Eucharistic spirituality. The earlier meanings of "communion" in the sacrament would be virtually lost.
- While the *official* teaching of the Church continued to emphasize that the Eucharist is spiritual food and a source of communion for all the faithful, there was also a superstitious thread developing within the Church. Some people began to think of the Eucharist as a type of magic talisman to ward off danger and illness.

#### **Early medieval period (6<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries):**

While the Eastern (Greek) Church maintained a close connection between the Mass and Eucharistic adoration, two major developments in the Western (Latin) Church led to adoration becoming increasingly *separated* from the liturgy.

- The decline of major cities shifted power away from Bishops and their churches and toward certain influential monasteries.
- As the Roman Empire collapsed, Germanic tribes descending from the North came to dominate Western Europe, and their spirituality came to dominate the Western Church. The Germanic religious imagination was based more on *miracles*, as opposed to doctrinal or moral teachings. Their spirituality emphasized sacred places (like shrines and altars) and sacred objects (especially relics), which were believed to impart instantaneous spiritual benefits.

#### Altars:

Altars became special places for prayer. In monasteries, monks would make frequent visits to altars. As this trend spread to the laity, churches were furnished with multiple altars, instead of just one. Often, people sought miraculous healings from these visits. Note, however, that the Blessed Sacrament was *not* reserved on any of these altars. The altar was a powerful symbol of Christ because of his presence there *during the Eucharistic liturgy*, not because he remained there afterwards.

#### Relics:

Relics, especially of the martyrs, eventually replaced altars as the main focus of devotion. In fact, by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, all new altars were required to contain a relic of a martyr.

Relics, and the shrines where they were kept, took on enormous economic and political significance throughout medieval Europe. Pilgrims flocked to these sites in large numbers. It was commonly believed that seeing, or being blessed with, a relic of a revered saint could bring an answer to all of one's prayers.

Because relics were thought to possess magical powers, they became valuable commodities, which were bought and sold, traded, stolen, counterfeited, and wielded as symbols of power. The most prized relics remained those of the martyrs.

#### The Eucharist as a type of relic:

As a result of this fixation on relics of the martyrs, the *Eucharist* became prized as a type of relic of the *original martyr, Jesus Christ*. There is evidence from the 8<sup>th</sup> century of the consecrated bread and wine both being treated like relics:

- Pieces of the consecrated bread were sometimes deposited in newly constructed altars.
- People were sometimes buried with pieces of the consecrated bread or small containers of the consecrated wine.

Devotion to the Eucharist was becoming far removed from the liturgy, and the once intimate connection between the sacrament and the worshipping community was being eroded. The Eucharist was gradually becoming an object of superstition and private devotion.

### Late medieval period (11<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries):

During this period, several factors influenced the faithful to emphasize *adoration* of the Blessed Sacrament more than its *reception* in Holy Communion.

### Confusion about the meaning of “Real Presence”:

During the late medieval period, many people erroneously came to believe that the Eucharist is *literally* a relic of the historical Jesus’ physical body. This explains some of the bizarre stories about bleeding hosts.

Modern theologians distinguish between the *historical* body of Jesus, the *ecclesial* Body of Christ (the faithful of the Church), and the *sacramental* Body of Christ, present in the Eucharist. All three are the Real Presence of Christ, but in different modes of being. The Early Church emphasized the intimate connection between the *sacramental* and *ecclesial* bodies of Christ. (We become the ecclesial Body of Christ by sharing the sacramental Body of Christ.) The Late Medieval Church practically ignored the ecclesial dimension of Eucharist and virtually equated the *sacramental* and *historical* bodies of Christ. As a result, Eucharistic spirituality became intensely personal and *private*.

### Pervasive sense of unworthiness:

During the medieval period, the laity of the Church came to view themselves not as members of the Body of Christ, but as a community of penitents, unworthy of the sacraments. This thinking became so pervasive and so extreme that the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, felt a need to *mandate* that the faithful receive Holy Communion at least once a year. People generally went to Mass only to “see” the Eucharist from a distance, lest they commit sacrilege by receiving the Eucharist unworthily.

This obsession with unworthiness extended to the priest, too. Several silent prayers for the celebrant were added to the Mass, to remind him of his own sinfulness. The liturgical reform of Vatican II stripped away some, but not all, of these accretions. One key prayer which remains is the one that the priest says together with the assembly before receiving Communion: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” Note that this prayer emphasizes the power of the Eucharist to *overcome* our unworthiness and heal us.

### New emphasis on Consecration rather than Communion:

With reception of Holy Communion becoming a rarity, the moment of *consecration* became far more important for the faithful attending Mass. Up to this point, during the words of institution, the celebrant had simply *held* the host and the chalice in his hands, like Jesus at the Last Supper, and then returned them to the altar. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Mass was changed to include a dramatic *elevation* and a ringing of bells after each element was consecrated. This became the focal point of the entire Mass and the subject of much superstition. Many people came to believe that gazing upon the elevated host could result in all sorts of miracles. Some people even paid the priest to hold up the host for a longer period of time.

### Tabernacles:

During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it also became common to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in churches. This practice led to the construction of permanent *tabernacles*, initially built into the wall of a side chapel, and later into the high altar, accompanied by a lit sanctuary lamp. These tabernacles became a place of prayer, similar to the altars of the early medieval period. However, those earlier altars were considered sacred because of Christ's presence there *during* the liturgy, whereas the later tabernacles were considered sacred because of Christ's continuing presence there *outside* of the liturgy.

### Monstrances:

The *monstrance* (from the Latin word meaning "to show") was a logical development, given the widespread desire to gaze upon the Blessed Sacrament whenever possible. Similar devices, with a long stem and a central glass portal, already existed for the display of relics. The portal was simply enlarged to fit a consecrated host, the "relic" of Christ. Sometimes elaborate monstrances were built into the outside of tabernacles or high altars as part of a church's architecture. Eventually, stand-alone monstrances also became elaborate works of art.

### Eucharistic exposition:

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Eucharistic *exposition* became a popular new liturgical form. Some Church leaders expressed concerns about this new practice virtually replacing Mass for many of the faithful. Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa famously commented that the Blessed Sacrament had been instituted as *food* and not for display. The Vatican's Sacred Congregation of Rites shared this concern and taught that exposition should not be offered too frequently.

### Promotion of "spiritual communion":

Theologians of the late medieval period increasingly distinguished between physically receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion and receiving its spiritual benefits by other means, what they called "spiritual communion." This was a radical departure from the Early Church, in which adoration was seen as *preparation* for the reception of Holy Communion, not as a substitute for it. Some 15<sup>th</sup>-century theologians went so far as to claim that spiritual communion was *superior* to sacramental communion. This was a gross distortion of Eucharistic spirituality, which was finally corrected after Vatican II.

### **Tridentine period (16<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries):**

After the Protestant Reformation, Eucharistic adoration found new forms of expression, which sought not just a *momentary encounter* with Christ, for the purpose of receiving miracles, but a *sustained communion* with Christ, for the purpose of building a deeper relationship with him. This was accomplished through extended periods of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

### Forty Hours Devotions:

The number forty has great significance in the Bible. In the early centuries of the Church, a tradition developed that claimed Jesus was in the tomb for forty hours. That led to various types of forty-hour vigils during Good Friday and Holy Saturday. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this idea

was combined with the now popular practice of Eucharistic exposition to spur a new tradition of a forty-hour prayer vigil *in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament*. It began at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Milan, Italy, where the devotion was done four times a year. Then other Milanese churches joined in to create a continuous rotation of forty hour devotions throughout the city. Eventually, the practice spread to Rome, and then to other countries.

#### Perpetual adoration:

The concept of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament may have begun as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but became much more widespread as a result of the rotating Forty Hours Devotions in Milan and Rome. A new religious charism developed within the Church, with the founding of religious communities explicitly dedicated to perpetual adoration. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many lay associations dedicated to perpetual adoration also emerged, extending the practice outside of convents, monasteries and other religious houses and into parishes.

In recent times, many of these religious communities, lay organizations and parishes have reduced their hours of daily adoration for practical reasons, exposing the Blessed Sacrament each morning and reposing it each night.

#### Benediction:

The practice of blessing people with the exposed Blessed Sacrament grew out of Corpus Christi processions, where the faithful would pause for prayer at various locations and receive a blessing with the monstrance before continuing on their procession. This ritual also recalls a more ancient practice of blessing people with the relics of martyrs. Eventually, benediction became incorporated into the liturgy of Eucharistic exposition.

#### Personal holy hours:

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque popularized the practice of a personal holy hour dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on First Fridays. The concept of a regular holy hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, either daily or monthly, became quite popular among the faithful and the clergy.

#### Private visits to the Blessed Sacrament:

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, St. Alphonsus Liguori promoted the idea of seeking spiritual communion with Christ and with the Virgin Mary by visiting the “Most Holy Sacrament” and the “Most Blessed Virgin.” He published rubrics for individuals to follow as they made their private visits to these altars or shrines. This was a way of encouraging personal piety outside of the traditional liturgical rituals of the Church.

#### Vatican II era (1962–present):

The Second Vatican Council sought to look back to the *roots* of the Church and restore critical aspects of our theology and practice that had become lost or distorted over the course of many centuries. Among other insights, that historical examination rediscovered how strongly the Early Church emphasized the communal nature of the Eucharist and the frequent reception of Holy Communion, two aspects of Eucharistic spirituality that the medieval Church had

practically discarded as insignificant. Since Vatican II, the Church has tried to integrate those foundational aspects of Eucharist which were central to the Early Church with the healthy devotional practices which developed during the Tridentine period.

*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacramentum Concilium) – 1963:*

The first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council highlighted the centrality of the Mass, calling it the “source and summit” of the Christian life. While it did not deal specifically with Eucharistic devotions, it did give certain criteria by which all popular devotions should be judged:

1. They should harmonize with the liturgical seasons.
2. They should be in agreement with the sacred liturgy (the Mass).
3. They should in some way be derived from the sacred liturgy.
4. They should lead people back to the liturgy, since “the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them.”

These criteria would clearly call into question some of the devotional practices of the medieval period and later. However, the Council did not produce any guidelines for amending those practices. Instead, it focused on reforming the sacred liturgy itself, and left the treatment of popular devotions for later consideration.

*Mysterium Fidei (The Mystery of Faith) – 1965, Pope Paul VI:*

At the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI wrote this encyclical to address serious pastoral concerns and anxieties related to the Council and the clash of old and new ideas, which the Church was attempting to reconcile. In particular, he sought to link Eucharistic devotion to the restoration of the liturgy, and to reaffirm several devotional practices. He specifically endorsed exposition, processions with the Blessed Sacrament, the annual feast of Corpus Christi, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

*Instruction on Eucharistic Worship – 1967, Sacred Congregation of Rites:*

This document was an early attempt to provide directives for celebrating Eucharistic devotions in conformity with the criteria for popular devotions enumerated in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. For example, to underscore the centrality of the Mass as the premier expression of Eucharistic faith, this *Instruction* forbade the celebration of Mass in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament.

*Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass – 1973, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship:*

This document, for the first time, gathered all of the relevant texts, rites and rubrics for worship of the Eucharist, both at Mass and outside of Mass. It is the most comprehensive and definitive text to deal with this subject, building on the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and the *Instruction on Eucharistic Worship*, and clarifying some of the principles that should govern Eucharistic devotions outside of Mass.

Some key teachings include the following:

- Eucharistic adoration should draw the faithful into “deeper participation in the paschal mystery.” (Adoration does not substitute for Mass, but deepens our ability to participate in the Mass.)
- Practices involving prayer before the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass should *extend* the union experienced by the faithful in sacramental communion. (Spiritual communion does not replace sacramental communion, but extends it beyond Mass.)
- Eucharistic exposition should not in any way obscure Christ’s desire to be with us as food, medicine and comfort through the reception of Holy Communion. (Through the Eucharist, Christ invites us to receive him intimately, not to remain at a distance.)

Some cautions from the document:

- “Lengthy exposition” should ordinarily take place only once a year, with “suitable numbers” of the faithful present at all times. (There appears to be a concern about ensuring that a proper worship environment is maintained all the while that the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.) An exception was made for houses of religious communities, where members of the community would take turns throughout the period of exposition.
- Eucharistic processions were treated with caution. Local bishops were encouraged to judge carefully whether such a public display of the Eucharist would serve the faithful or lead to a loss a reverence for the Eucharist. (This caution remains in place. Eucharistic processions generally require the Bishop’s approval, except on the feast of Corpus Christi.)

*Dominicae Cenaе (For Holy Thursday) – 1980, Pope St. John Paul II:*

In this apostolic letter and in subsequent letters and homilies, Pope St. John Paul II strongly encouraged all manner of Eucharistic devotions. Although he never abrogated the norms of *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, he never mentioned them, either.

Not surprisingly, John Paul’s pontificate saw a resurgence of Eucharistic devotions, especially perpetual adoration. With no guidance coming from Rome, individual bishops or bishops’ conferences took responsibility for maintaining a healthy relationship between the sacred liturgy and devotions outside of Mass. To that end, several dioceses published directives to govern the practice of perpetual adoration.

**Eucharistic spirituality today:**

Generally speaking, practicing Catholics today seem to understand the following principles:

- Participation in Sunday Mass and the weekly reception of Holy Communion are the center of our spiritual life, as individuals and as a Church.
- Receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion not only nourishes us personally, but it also binds all of us together as the Body of Christ in the world.
- Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass can extend and deepen that feeling of personal communion with Christ that begins with receiving him sacramentally at Mass.