
EUCCHARISTIC ADORATION AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY: LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH EYES THAT ADORE THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

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[Editor's note: The following is based on remarks by Fr. Di Noia at *ADOREMUS 2005: The Eucharist and Man's Identity*, October 7, 2005.]

I AM HONORED to address this international encounter of young people dedicated to Eucharistic adoration. The overall theme of the meeting — the “Eucharistic identity of man” — is intended to stimulate reflection on the consequences of the encounter between human beings and Christ, who reveals to them what it means to be human.

Within the framework of this overall theme, I have been invited to address the topic of faith and politics. In particular, I have been asked to unmask what Pope John Paul II called “the false dilemma” — either God or man — and to demonstrate the harmful consequences of this false dilemma. Among the most serious of these consequences is the emergence of an ideology of evil that today inspires certain political leaders and even some democratic parliaments to initiate projects that are contrary to the identity and mission of the family, and, what is worse, to the dignity of human life itself.

What difference does it make when you look at these issues through the same eyes that have beheld and adored Christ in the most holy Sacrament of the altar? Surely, no one who has beheld and adored the Eucharistic

Lord can fail to see the world in a completely new way — to see things through the eyes of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and thus to understand the Catholic response to the great social problems of our times and the necessity of responsible engagement in political life *in the light of this experience of Eucharistic adoration*.

Beholding Christ and Being Beheld by Him

During Eucharistic adoration, it is not only we who behold Christ, but He who beholds us in turn. When we adore the Blessed Sacrament, we are not just gazing at a beautiful but inert object. The contemplative mode of prayer that we learn during adoration presupposes that Christ returns our gaze.

To understand what this means, we must begin with the Eucharistic sacrifice itself. At four important moments during the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest elevates the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood of the Lord.

The first moment is during the consecration when the priest elevates first the Sacred Host and then the chalice containing the Precious Blood. The second moment occurs when, at the conclusion of the Eucharistic prayer, the priest raises the Host and the chalice together just before the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Then, before the

distribution of Holy Communion, the priest presents the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood to the entire congregation with the words “Behold the Lamb of God. . . .” Finally, in a more personal moment, each communicant is invited to behold and adore the Sacred Host just before receiving “the Bread of Life.”

It is in these significant moments of “elevation” that we find the roots of Eucharistic exposition and adoration (as well as the profound connection between the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass and Eucharistic devotion to the Blessed Sacrament). Christ, who was raised up on the cross for our sake, who rose from the dead and ascended to the right of the Father, is raised up again at Mass so that we may look on Him and be saved. In the solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, this “being raised up for our sake” is prolonged and extended. In exposition, adoration, and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, we have *the contemplative extension or prolongation of the Eucharistic sacrifice itself*. The Christian faithful who behold, adore, and receive Christ in the Sacrament of the altar desire to continue, in a more contemplative and protracted manner, to look with love on Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament.

When Saint Thomas Aquinas discusses exposition and benediction,

he asks whether Christ is made more present to us when the Sacred Host is removed from the tabernacle and placed inside the monstrance for our adoration. Aquinas responds in the negative: how could the door of the tabernacle separate us from Christ? When the Sacred Host is enshrined in the monstrance in exposition, according to Saint Thomas, it is not that Christ becomes more present to us, but rather, it is that *we become more present to Him*. In beholding Him exposed to us in the monstrance, our attention is more focused and concentrated. In that sense, we become more present to Him.

School of Contemplation

This prolonged beholding is the school of contemplation in which we become ever more conformed to the divine mystery. In this connection, we may recall the words of Saint Albert the Great: by gazing on what is good, we become good. This experience of contemplative prayer is in a real sense a foretaste of the experience of Heaven itself where we will be able to gaze upon Christ in all His glory.

In beholding Him, we also adore Him. It is the most natural, instinctive response we have to seeing the Blessed Sacrament exposed: we cannot resist falling to our knees.

Three Moments of Adoration

Love, of course, leads to communion, both in the sense of our ever-deepening interior union with Christ, but also in the sense of receiving Him in Holy Communion as our very food. Thus, we have the three moments of Eucharistic adoration: beholding, adoring, and receiving. Saint Augustine says, “No one receives the flesh who, beholding him, has not first adored him.”

These remarkable words show how participation in the sacrifice of the Mass leads to Eucharistic adora-

tion, which itself leads us back to the Eucharistic sacrifice. First beholding and adoring during the Mass, we then literally receive Christ as food in Holy Communion. During Eucharistic adoration, our beholding and adoring engender an interior reception of Christ at the same time that they prepare us for a deepened participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice and the reception of Holy Communion. These reflections demonstrate how confused and erroneous are those objections to the devotion of exposition and adoration that complain that Eucharistic adoration detracts from participation in the Eucharistic celebration. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Trinitarian Communion

Beholding, adoring, receiving: three moments leading us to communion. At its depth, this communion is nothing less than the communion we enjoy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Triune God desires to share the communion of Trinitarian life with us, with creaturely persons. No one has ever desired anything more than the Triune God desires this, and nothing makes sense apart from this. God Himself has revealed to us (for how could we otherwise have known about it?) that it is this divine desire — more properly, intention and plan — that lies at the basis of everything: creation, incarnation, redemption, sanctification, and glory.

Why Were We Created?

This is one of the first things we see when we learn to look at everything through the perspective of Christ Himself as He gazes on us from the monstrance. We learn to see everything in the light of this divine desire to share the communion of Trinitarian life with us. Looking at

things this way — looking at them the way that Christ himself has taught us to do — we understand why we were created, why the Word became flesh, why Christ died and rose from the dead, how the Holy Spirit makes us holy, and why we will see God face to face. We were created so that God could share His life with us. God sent His only-begotten Son to save us from the sins that would have made it impossible for us to share in this life. Christ died for this, and, rising from the dead, gave us new life. To become holy is to be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church, into the image of the Son so that we may be adopted as sons and daughters of the Father. Glory is the consummation of our participation in the communion of the triune God — nothing less than seeing God face to face.

“Why Not?”

The experience of adoration also teaches us something very important about the mystery of the Eucharist itself. Why did Christ make himself present to us in this way? Why did He make it so easy for us to behold, adore, and receive him?

According to Saint John’s Gospel, the first people to hear Christ proclaim the Eucharist asked exactly that question. Some embraced our Lord’s words in faith, but others were put off by it. When they heard Christ say: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” they asked, incredulously, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

How can this be indeed — a perfectly natural question from the human point of view. However, let us

suppose that we adopt Christ's point of view. When we do this, we may find that our troubled "how can this be?" becomes an awestruck and faith-filled "why not?"

God desires to share His life with us in the most intimate manner. The Catholic tradition has not hesitated to describe this participation in the divine life as a true friendship with God. Given this truth of our faith, is it not in a sense appropriate that God should be moved to send His only-begotten Son into the world and, in the breathtaking divine condescension of the incarnation, to take up a human existence to be known and loved among us as Jesus of Nazareth? Was it not fitting that the Son of Man should offer His life to His Father on the Cross in a reconciling sacrifice of love for our sake?

It is but a short step from the Incarnation to the Holy Eucharist. In this connection, Saint Thomas wrote: "It is a law of friendship that friends should live together. . . . Christ has not left us without his bodily presence on our pilgrimage, but he joins us to himself in this Sacrament in the reality of his body and blood." In effect, Aquinas is saying that it makes sense, given what we know about God's plan to bring us into the intimacy of His divine life, to leave us the extraordinary gift of the real and substantial presence of His Son in the Eucharist. Pope John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: "It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple (cf. Jn 13:25) and to feel the infinite love present in his heart."

Love Without Measure

However, there is more. This is a friendship expressed in the ultimate sacrifice of love in which Christ gave His body and blood up for our sake.

When He instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, "Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and blood; he also expressed its sacrificial meaning and made sacramentally present his sacrifice that would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all."⁴ By overcoming the effects of sin, the sacrificial passion and death of Christ and His glorious resurrection — the Paschal mystery — restored our friendship with God. In this connection, Pope John Paul made a striking point: "This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father *only after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there."⁵ Not only does our Divine Friend want to stay with us; He wants to do so precisely in virtue of the power of the Paschal mystery that guarantees what must now, always and everywhere, be a reconciled friendship won at the price of His blood.

The experience of beholding, adoring, and receiving the Eucharistic Christ teaches us all this. No wonder that Pope John Paul II could write: "I want once more to recall this truth and to join you, my dear brothers and sisters, in adoration before this mystery: a great mystery, a mystery of mercy. What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, He shows us a love that goes 'to the end' (cf. Jn 13:1), a love which knows no measure."⁶

The Identity of Man from Christ's Point of View

Eucharistic adoration teaches us how to behold and adore Christ in order to receive Him and deepen our communion with Him. For, as we sit in quiet contemplation of the Lord

present in the Blessed Sacrament, He is also gazing at us. This one who gazes at us from the monstrance became one of us and, what is more, gave His life up for us out of the love of friendship. In the contemplative discipline we learn in Eucharistic adoration, we begin to adopt Christ's own perspective — to see what He sees in us who have become His friends.

What He sees in us are His adopted brothers and sisters, created in the image of God and growing into the image of the Incarnate Word Himself, the perfect image of God. The image of God is always a work in progress. In the life of grace, the concrete human person is always *in via*, always being drawn to the Father, partly impeded by sin. He or she is redeemed by Christ, yet still undergoing a lifelong transformation in the power of the Holy Spirit, with a view to the final consummation of a life of communion with the Blessed Trinity and with the saints. This is the profound meaning of the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, "It is only in the mystery of the word made flesh that the mystery of man becomes truly clear."⁷ Created in the image of God, human persons are meant to grow into the image of Christ. As they become increasingly conformed to the perfect man, Jesus Christ, the fullness of their humanity is realized.

By becoming more like Christ, we become more fully ourselves. By gazing at Christ, we come to understand our true reality and our astonishing possibilities. Our conformation to Christ is not a kind of cloning, but the realization of our distinctive and unique personal identity. The Eucharistic Christ reveals to us our true identity and undertakes the transformation that will bring it more and more to light. Otherwise, how could we be called to an authentic

interpersonal communion with God and with one another? The image of God in us consists precisely in the spiritual capacities of knowing and loving that make interpersonal communion possible. Such communion presupposes the full realization, not the absorption or dissolution, of the persons who enter into it. Thus, if the Eucharistic Christ is to be the principle of our transformation, it can only mean that in being conformed to Him, we each discover and realize our unique identities as persons.

How amazing this is! In effect, it means that an indefinite number of persons will find their distinctive identities in being conformed to Christ. Clearly, only the inexhaustibly rich, perfect image of God who is the Person of the Son could constitute the principle and pattern for the transformation and fulfillment of every human being who has ever lived.

The Eucharistic Christ teaches us that God wants us to be as fully ourselves, as human beings and as persons, as we can possibly be through the power of grace and the Holy Spirit — because only then can we enter into a mature and authentic interpersonal communion with Him and with one another.

The Divine Invitation

Christ shows us that, since we are persons, and precisely as persons, we must *freely* embrace the personal communion that is offered to us by the triune God as our ultimate good and perfect happiness. Christ's grace empowers us to do so, but it empowers us to do so *freely*. Here lies the meaning of authentic freedom. Christian freedom is not a matter of indifferent choice but a participation in God's own freedom. Freedom is the God-given capacity to enter in a personal way in the realization of our

true happiness. Precisely as persons, we must freely embrace this invitation or, of course, fail to. Animals and plants cannot embrace their good or, for that matter, fail to. Only persons are free to join their hearts and minds to the pursuit of the good of personal communion.



Precisely as persons, our actions count for something. We do not become good, or fail to become good, by coercion. In each action, and in some more than others, we choose the good or fail to. In this perspective, sin is not so much the exercise of freedom as it is the failure of freedom — the failure to embrace our true good. This is the basis of the moral life, through which we are conformed to the Good by desiring and choosing the good in each of our actions. Through His passion, death, and resurrection, Christ has already overcome the deadly effects of our sinful actions and makes it possible for us to overcome them through conversion, forgiveness, and repentance. In this way, we are continually growing into fitness to enjoy the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In exploring the meaning of the word *adoration* during his homily at Marienfeld, our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI stated that “adoration refers to the gesture of submission, the recognition of God as our true measure. . . . It means that freedom is not simply about enjoying life in total autonomy, but rather about living by the measure of truth and goodness, so that we ourselves can become true and good.” However, in the end, he continued, “submission becomes union, because He to whom we submit is Love. In this way, submission does not impose anything, because it does not impose on us from the outside, but liberates us deep within.”

All this, and much more, the Eucharistic Christ reveals to those who behold and adore Him.

Political Responsibility of Catholic Citizens

The vision of the human person that we gain through our adoration of the Eucharistic Christ has many implications for our political responsibility as Catholic citizens and, perhaps for some of us in our respective countries in the future, as Catholic leaders in public life.

The most evident implication of this vision of the human person is this: the experience of adoration teaches us that the reality and destiny of human beings cannot be constrained by any this-worldly boundaries or limits. That desire to be with God and to live for God above all else — a desire that is nurtured and fed by our Eucharistic Lord — shows us that human beings cannot be instrumentalized for the achievement of the ends of any society or state. Human nature as such is created in the image of God, to enjoy, through

the capacities of knowing and loving, interpersonal communion.

Transformed and elevated by grace, these capacities in faith, hope, and charity extend even to the knowledge and love of the Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Thus, the supernatural, or more properly the *graced*, destiny of human beings is in a real sense continuous with human nature as such. Only persons who can know and love by nature can be empowered in grace to know and love the Triune God. This is what it means to say that we are created in the image of God, and yet we are growing into the image of Christ, the perfect man who is a man nonetheless. In creating us in His image, God already implanted in us a natural movement directing us toward Him: knowledge and love open the human mind and heart to the infinite, to the ultimate Truth and the supreme Good which is God himself.

Now we arrive at a point with enormous importance for our understanding of the nature of human societies and their political systems. Created in the image of God, it follows that human beings by their very nature possess a participation in the divine law. According to the International Theological Commission's 2004 document, *Communion and Stewardship*: "This natural law orients human persons to the pursuit of the good in their actions."⁸ Earthly societies and their polities, rooted as they are in the interpersonal or social nature of human beings *per se*, must be organized and regulated according to the natural law that serves the common good in this life and, at least implicitly, the good beyond this life, which is the final destiny of every human being. It is one of the deepest convictions of

Catholic social doctrine — articulated forcefully and continually by Pope John Paul II — that a moral consensus based in the natural law must form the foundation of all social and political systems that would honor the dignity of the human person and seek the common good of their societies.

What seems almost self-evident to those who behold and adore the Eucharistic Christ is by no means evident to many in the societies in which we live. As Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI have seen with such utter clarity, a profound and prevailing doubt about the possibility of achieving this moral consensus lies at the basis of the crisis of western democratic societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This crisis forms the context for our consideration of the political responsibility of Catholic citizens and politicians today.

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Cultural Crisis

It is impossible in this brief presentation today to do justice to these complex issues. I strongly recommend that you read and study at least the three great encyclicals of Pope

John Paul II: *Evangelium Vitae*, where he defends life against the culture of death; *Veritatis Splendor*, where he defends the knowability of objective moral truth, and *Fides et Ratio*, where he defends reason itself from unreason, skepticism, and relativism.

In these encyclicals, we find a painstaking analysis of the cultural crisis that has undermined confidence in the possibility of reaching a consensus about moral truth.

In general, the democratic societies that have emerged since the end of the eighteenth century based themselves on some consensus about the natural law. The understanding of the natural law that inspired the founders of these democracies was profoundly influenced by Christianity even when this influence was not acknowledged. Nonetheless, they saw the necessity of basing positive law on the principles of natural law, which they understood to be knowable apart from adherence to any particular religious traditions, whether those held by a now sharply-divided Christianity, or those held by the small number of non-Christians in their midst. There was a conviction that, despite cultural and religious differences, all men possessed an identical human nature and were entitled, more or less, to the rights of self-government and equal protection under the law. Underlying this conviction was another, deeper one that recognized that the democratic state did not so much *confer* the rights and duties of citizenship as *acknowledge* their existence and source in a power beyond the state, namely in God himself.

Until thirty years or forty years ago, the presumption had been that democratic societies would base themselves on some such consensus

about the natural law. The situation that the Church faces in democratic societies today is the gradual erosion of this consensus. It is perhaps significant that among the first signs of this erosion were the fateful separation of sexuality from reproduction, and then the introduction of permissive abortion legislation. There are many causes for these developments. However, the chief one is a judgment that the pluralism that democratic societies enjoy is such as to undermine their confidence in the possibility of any consensus about the natural law and moral truth or to exclude such a consensus as an inappropriate imposition of particular religious views on persons whose religious views are diverse or non-existent.

Pope John Paul's experience of life under Nazism and Communism convinced him that if no consensus about truth is possible, then there can only be the consensus imposed by power, and ultimately by totalitarian systems. If we cannot agree about the principles upon which our democratic societies should be based, then those who have the greatest power will be able to impose their view upon the rest. Hence, as Pope John Paul frequently said, truth and freedom go together; without truth, there is no freedom.

Perilous Consequences of False Humanism

However, Pope John Paul's analysis of the cultural crisis of the West went much deeper than this. He saw the crisis in terms of what he identified as the false dilemma that frames the drama of human existence in such a way that man is portrayed as compelled to find his true identity and freedom apart from and in opposition to God. This idea, which masquerades as

humanism, is in fact an anti-humanism of the most radical kind. Sixty years ago, in a remarkable book called *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, Father Henri de Lubac exposed this false humanism as well as its lethal consequences for western civilization. The deliberate rejection of God cannot be the road to authentic human liberation. Indeed, the contrary is the case. Contemplating the tragic history of the twentieth century, the Servant of God Pope John Paul II saw with utter clarity that the eclipse of God leads not to greater human liberation but to the most dire human peril. Man without God is not more free, but he is surely in greater danger. This is what Pope John Paul meant by the culture of death. In the words of Father De Lubac: "It is not true, as is sometimes said, that man can not organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can only organize it against man." As Mother Theresa famously remarked, "If a child is not safe in the womb, none of us is safe anywhere."

Doctrinal Note on Christian Responsibility

Throughout the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the Holy See sought to alert Catholic citizens and Catholics who are involved in public life in democratic societies of the new situation created by the erosion of a consensus about natural law and thus about moral truth. In addition to the encyclicals mentioned, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2002 published a short document called a *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Concerning the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. This document is not a primer on the Church's social doctrine (for this, one must consult the *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church and the Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church). The *Doctrinal Note* presumes a general familiarity with the Church's social teaching, and concentrates rather on the particular challenges posed by the erosion of the consensus about moral truth that had previously formed the basis for democratic societies and was generally shared by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

According to the *Doctrinal Note*, the Christian responsibility in view of these challenges is the absolute obligation to oppose laws that attack human life. There are fundamental and inalienable ethical demands arising from the objective moral order, especially the truth that human life begins at conception and ends at natural death. No one has the authority or specious right to interfere with life at any stage. As a result of various forms of assisted fertility, especially of in vitro fertilization, the human embryo itself is now an object of scientific investigation and manipulation. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI providentially decried the fateful separation of procreation and sexuality, and the so-called sexual revolution, the consequences of which we now observe with astonishment and perplexity. If sexuality and procreation are not connected intrinsically, then each goes its own way according to a menu of seemingly endless and nightmarish possibilities.

The *Doctrinal Note* adds to the fundamental inalienable demands of protecting human life and the human embryo a consideration of what it terms analogous demands concerning family and marriage, the education of children, the protection of minors, opposition to slavery, religious freedom, economic policy, peace, and the rejection of violence

and terrorism. The areas of moral obligation are termed “analogous” not in order to diminish their importance, but to acknowledge the greater moral weight of the obligation to protect innocent life. The *Doctrinal Note* points out that there is a similar way in which faith, combined with natural law, throws light on the responsibility of a Catholic in political life. However, these analogous demands must be interpreted in the context of the moral tradition of the Church that clarifies their moral gravity or weight in relation to the moral gravity of abortion, euthanasia and the manipulation of the human embryo.

It is important to recognize that Catholic teaching in these areas does not impinge upon the rightful autonomy of the temporal order or on the legitimate cultural and religious pluralism of most modern societies.

The *Doctrinal Note* resists absolutely the suggestion that the bringing to bear of moral considerations such as we have been discussing represents a sectarian intrusion on the freedom of thought or religion in the public realm. To seek to persuade others of the dignity of the human person, or the sacredness of life from conception to natural death, or the rights of the human embryo is to introduce considerations drawn from the natural law and universal moral truth. Such forms of argument are utterly different from those that would be employed in discussions of the nature of the Blessed Trinity or of transubstantiation, for example, which are matters strictly internal to the doctrine of the Catholic faith. The *Doctrinal Note* insists, rather, that it is possible for a Catholic in political life, who is properly informed about such matters, to bring to bear his or

her understanding of what it means to be human and, therefore, to defend the dignity of the human person and rights of the human embryo without appealing to particular Catholic doctrines that would not be shared by a Lutheran, a Muslim, or an atheist. To be against abortion or euthanasia or embryonic stem cell research is not simply a matter of Catholic teaching. It is a matter of the natural law and the consensus about moral truth that is fundamental to democratic societies, which we abandon at our peril. Legitimate cultural and religious pluralism cannot erase the universal moral truths derived from the nature of what it is to be human.

Conclusion

The Eucharistic Christ, who is fully human, makes it possible for us to realize our human possibilities in a way that nonetheless transcends them absolutely. To find the meaning of human existence in a divine fulfillment does not entail the suppression of human nature itself, but its transformation and elevation. The supernatural end of seeing God face to face is the full realization of potentialities embedded in human nature by God himself. The great variety of cultural differences that so enrich human life and society on this earth do not obliterate the fundamental commonality of nature, which is not itself a cultural product, but is constituted by a divine creative act.

The experience of Eucharistic adoration thus teaches us something very radical about ourselves, about others, and about the societies in which we live. From the Christian perspective, the moral law is an expression of the good that human beings must seek in order to be

fulfilled as humans. Thus, the moral law is not a constraint on the freedom of the human person; rather, the moral law frees the person to become fully human. It follows that human societies and polities that seek their foundations in profound and universal truths about human nature provide the environment for the exercise of authentic freedom and the ample cultivation of the common good. Even when our fellow citizens and colleagues in public life do not possess the Christian faith, we are obliged by our very humanity to share with them a vision of the dignity of the human person, fully revealed only in the Christ, but nonetheless knowable by every human being created in the image of God. It is this conviction that grounds the political responsibility of every Catholic citizen or public leader who has beheld, adored and received the Eucharistic Christ and learned to see the world as He sees it. ■■

[Editor's note: J. Augustine Di Noia, O.P., is Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.]

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