

Theology of Adoration¹

by John H. McKenna, C.M.

Eastern Province, USA

The theology of adoration is really a part of a broader question: communion and worship of the Eucharist outside its celebration. The purpose of this article is to give a brief historical sketch of communion practice and the origins of Eucharistic devotions outside the celebration of the Eucharistic. From these we hope to draw the theological roots of Eucharistic adoration and the challengers it presents today.

To start with, the early Christians had celebrated their Eucharist in the context of an ordinary meal. The emphasis was on the action of eating and drinking, of sharing a meal with the Risen Christ and with one another. They were especially concerned with the purpose of all this, namely, nourishing the Christ-life already within them through baptism, unity with each other in Christ and eternal life through a share in Christ's resurrection.²

As time went on, the Eucharist was separated from the ordinary meal, probably because of abuses.³ This was the case by the time of Justin Martyr (d. 165) who describes the Eucharist in terms of a "stylized" meal; i.e., one in which the bread and wine alone serve as food and drink. Justin makes the point that "... the gifts over which the thanksgiving has been spoken are distributed, and everyone shares in them, while they are also sent via the deacons to the absent brethren."⁴ All who are present receive and communion is brought to the sick so that they also can share the Sunday celebration. Thus the first evidence of communion outside of Mass links it intimately with the celebration itself and this holds true until the end of the 4th century.⁵

¹ Article originally published as "Adoration, Theology of" in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, Peter E. Fink, S.J., Editor (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press, 1990).

² Cf. John 6:51-58; 1 Corinthians 10:16-18; Acts 2:42-47.

³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

⁴ L. DEISS, *Springtime of the Liturgy*, translated by M.J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979) 93-94.

⁵ Cf. NATHAN MITCHELL, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharistic Outside Mass* (New York: Pueblo, 1982) II, 28.

The stress also continued to be on the receiving of communion and its purpose. Augustine (d. 430) put it so well: "If you receive well, you are what you have received.... Since you are the body of Christ and his members, it is your mystery that is placed on the Lord's table; it is your mystery that you receive.... Be what you see, and receive what you are."⁶ This same point was made by Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 461): "This partaking of the body and blood of Christ has no other effect than to make us pass over into what we receive."⁷

Up to the 4th century, the rule was that all the faithful partook in communion. But then with unexpected rapidity, at least in some countries, the number dropped off sharply. The reasons are numerous and complex and were to give rise to a shift in attitudes which would provide the setting for Eucharistic devotions outside the Mass. First, there were the Christological controversies. Arianism's attempt to play down Christ's divinity led to an overemphasis of that divinity almost to the exclusion of his humanity, despite Chalcedon's effort in 451 to strike a balance. The Risen Jesus became a distant God. This eventually led to the liturgy and clergy becoming distant as well. Second, the Eucharistic action and Eucharistic food were disengaged from communal acts of dining. This in turn led to a new interpretation in which "... the ancient human symbols of dining together were reinterpreted as *ritual drama*, vivid symbolic reenactments of Jesus' life, death and resurrection."⁸ From there it was a short step to dramatic allegorizations like those of Amalar of Metz, which emphasized recalling the past rather than present participation though communion as Augustine and those before him had stressed. Third, the gradual limiting of the knowledge of the language of the liturgy (in this case Latin) to a select few widened the gap between the people and the celebration. The inability of the ordinary people to understand the language of the liturgy and thus to participate in it led them to seek an alternate language. Eating and drinking the Eucharist would gradually give way to "ocular communion," the desire to see the host. Finally, the growing distance and awesomeness of Christ and the liturgy was eventually to lead to a demand (9th century on) for sacramental confession before each communion and for a longer fast in preparation for communion.⁹

⁶ JAMES J. MEGIVERN, *Concomitance and Communion: A Study in Eucharistic Doctrine and Practice*, Studia Friburgensia, New Series # 33 (New York: Herder, 1963) 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸ MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁹ JOSEPH JUNGMANN, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, translated by F. Brunner and reviewed by C. Riepe (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1961) 56-70, 498-502; MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 4-5, 116-119; MEGIVERN, *op. cit.*, 63-66, 73-74, 81.

These factors probably account, at least in part, for the widespread use in the 9th century of unleavened bread, a tube or straw to drink from the chalice, communion on the tongue instead of the hand and communion *in church* outside the celebration of the Eucharist. The same factors plus controversies in the 9th, 11th and 12th centuries over Christ's presence in the Eucharist and the "moment of consecration," focused more attention on the elements of bread and wine and miracles in their regard, e.g., bleeding hosts. An ever-decreasing number of communicants followed. No longer able to participate actively in the language of the liturgy and, out of extreme reverence or fear, hesitating to partake in communion, the faithful were ripe for other forms of expressing their belief in Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The attitude that the Eucharist was something to be looked at and adored rather than eaten was to become characteristic of medieval Eucharistic piety.¹⁰

Reservation of the sacrament had obviously been a practice from the start so that communion could be brought to the sick and dying. In addition, in earlier times people were allowed to bring communion home for use during the week. The origin of prayer before the sacrament seems to be the priest's prayer before communion (11th century). This evolved into the people's praying after the elevation (late 12th century) and visits to the Blessed Sacrament (early 13th century). Reservation near or on the altar in the 13th century tended to focus the devotion in that area.¹¹

Eucharist processions appear as early as the 11th century, at least in England. As devotion to looking upon the host grew, these became a way to honor Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and to gaze at the host even longer. On the continent, the Bishop of Liège approved the feast of Corpus Christi for his diocese in 1276. It soon spread and included a procession of the Blessed Sacrament.¹²

The earliest form of exposing the Eucharistic species was just before communion with an expression like: "Holy things for the holy." Until the beginning of the 13th century this was the only place that the people were invited to gaze upon the sacred species and reverence them. With the introduction of the elevation, which in the 14th century came to be regarded as the supreme moment of the celebration, the people were invited to adore Our Lord immediately after the words of "consecration." Earlier it had been an invitation to partake of communion. Now, however, the invitation was to contemplation or "ocular communion." So far exposition had been

¹⁰ JUNGSMANN, *op. cit.*, 89-92, 502-512; MEGIVERN, *op. cit.*, 29-33, 78-84; MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 5-6.

¹¹ Cf. JUNGSMANN, *op. cit.*, 552-523; MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 164-170.

¹² Cf. MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 170-176.

from within the liturgy itself — at communion, at viaticum or communion to the dying, or Corpus Christi. In 1380 a popular custom arose in some parts of Germany to expose the sacrament in a monstrance. This eventually led to exposition in a monstrance apart from the liturgy.¹³

The origin of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was also from within the Liturgy of the Hours and of Corpus Christi. In the early 13th century it became popular to sing Marian hymns at the end of evening or night prayer. In the 14th century the trend was to do so in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament to enhance this devotion rather than to increase honor to the sacrament. On Corpus Christi as early as 1301, there were stations or pauses where the priest would bless the people with the sacrament and at the end of the procession they would be blessed by a monstrance or similar vessel.¹⁴

All these devotions to the Eucharist outside of Mass had their origins, then, in the liturgy. In addition, many of them seem to have appeared first in communities of religious.

As is often the case, the main theological lines of the attitudes and devotions emerge from history. Their roots lie in the belief that the Risen Christ is really present in the Eucharistic celebration to those who were sick or dying, in danger of persecution or absent for some other good reason. This is anthropologically as well as theologically sound and leads to what Piet Fransen describes as the “law of extension.” Symbolic realities, when they have central importance in our lives, tend to extend themselves in similar, if only analogical, expressions. A married couple, for instance, find many ways of expressing their love in addition to the marital act, e.g., kisses, touches, gazes. It is important not to disparage these extensions simply because they are not the central act or were not there from the very beginning, e.g., Eucharistic processions. It is equally important, however, to recall their original source and background and to relate them to that central celebration.¹⁵

The origin of all Eucharistic devotions outside Mass lies, as history tells us, in the liturgy itself. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of their purpose. Underlying all of them is belief in Christ’s presence, first in the sharing of the meal and then, by extension, in the remaining bread and wine. If Christ is present in the bread and wine, it seems legitimate and beneficial to adore him there. The difficulty, historically and theologically, is that his worship outside the celebration of the Eucharistic sometimes seemed to be loosed

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, 176-181.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 181-184.

¹⁵ Cf. P. FRANSEN, *Intelligent Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969).

from its moorings. That is its weakness. Its strength rests in its ability to give people time and quiet to reflect on what it means to receive the body of Christ — the whole body, as Augustine would say, head and members — into one's heart. There were good elements in the "elevation" or "tabernacle" piety; namely, personal devotions to Jesus, an awareness of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist and an awareness of the power of the Eucharist to draw one to imitate Christ's self-sacrifice. Perhaps more attention to these elements today would help us appropriate more deeply the paschal mystery of Christ which we celebrate in the Eucharist.¹⁶

Pastorally, the future is challenging. Is it possible to return to the center without losing the values of Eucharistic devotions outside of Mass? "The celebration of the Eucharist in the sacrifice of the Mass is truly the origin and goal of the worship which is shown to the Eucharist outside of Mass."¹⁷ Is it possible to rediscover the value of Eucharistic devotions outside of Mass without letting them again slip loose from their moorings? Mitchell's quote from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" is on target: "We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."¹⁸

All the Eucharistic devotions, even the most elaborate, have as their purpose or end to bring us back to the beginning — to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, sharing this meal and his paschal mystery with his people.

¹⁶ JUNGSMANN, *op. cit.*, 90-91; cf. also E. DIEDERICH, "Notes on Liturgy" and "The Eucharistic Mystery in All Its Fullness," in *Review for Religious* 42 (May-June and November-December 1983) 363-380, 914-927.

¹⁷ *Instruction on Eucharistic Worship*, 24 May 1967 (Washington, DC: 1967) Article 3^e.

¹⁸ MITCHELL, *op. cit.*, 8.