

THIS MOST BLESSED OF SACRAMENTS

by Rev. Thomas A. McGovern, S.J.

We are here this morning to direct our thoughts to the Holy Eucharist: to reconsider—as we cannot too often do—just what this sacrament is according to the teachings of the Church, its magnitude and its overwhelming grandeur. As Pope John Paul II named it—the *Inaestimabile Donum*—the inestimable gift.

St. Luke, in his account of the Last Supper, reports that Our Lord Jesus Christ, when He opened His final discourse to His chosen twelve at the end of that repast, began with the words, “With longing have I longed to eat this Pasch with you.” Words these are which must have aroused a certain wonder in the minds of His Apostles when they heard them. What was to occur at this repast that was to render it so special, in such an extraordinary way an object of longing on the part of their Lord and Master?

They had not so long to wait. Shortly, having offered for the last time the paschal lamb as a sacrifice pleasing to God, the Lord Christ offered for the first time the sacrifice of the New Law. He took the bread into His hands, as St. Luke relates, and said the words of consecration: “This is my body,” and then the chalice of wine: “...this is the new testament in My blood.” He said this with His instructions, “Do this in memory of Me.”

With these words, He gave to His disciples, and through them

Rev. Thomas A. McGovern, S.J., gave the following address at the November 11, 1984 Communion breakfast of the Holy Name Society of St. Sebastian Parish, Santa Paula, California. He was a member of the faculty of Thomas Aquinas College since 1972 and died a few months after he gave the address.

to theirs, and to ourselves in time, the gift precious beyond the power of any Apostle, or ourselves, or of any man, to suspect, imagine, or desire—the gift of His own human and divine self as food for our spiritual lives.

Human life needs nourishment. In a parallel way, so too, does the life of the soul. Bread and wine are food and drink and through these—as signs—the Lord Christ has given us His body and blood as just such food. Their mode of nourishing is just the opposite of that of natural food. The food we eat is transformed into us, and so nourishes us and sustains us. But the supernatural food of the soul, which is Christ, operates in just the opposite fashion. Christ is not transformed into us, but rather transforms us into Him, rooting and establishing us the more deeply and firmly in that mystical body of His which is His Church. This the Sacrament does through the grace and charity that it brings, through which we are the more able to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, and with our whole soul, and with our whole mind and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.

By means of this sacrament, from the time of His birth in Bethlehem until the world's end, Christ's followers might be never without Him. He was with His Apostles; He is still with us, only in a different mode.

As Pope Paul VI notes in his encyclical, *Mysterium Fidei*, of September, 1965, by so deigning to remain with us, the Lord Christ bestows an incomparable dignity upon the Christian people. As His Holiness expresses it: "While the Eucharist is reserved in churches and oratories, Christ is truly Emmanuel, which means, 'God with us.' He, the Incarnate God, is with us day and night. He dwells among us with the fullness of grace and truth, He raises the level of morals, fosters virtue, comforts the sorrowing, and stirs up all those who draw near to Him to imitate Him."

The encyclical to which I have just alluded is, in fact, the last document of a doctrinal nature and of any length issued by the Holy See on the subject of the Eucharist. Its title is *Mysterium Fidei*, the mystery of faith, an epithet that has, in the Church,

always been reserved for the Holy Eucharist.

If we understand by the word *mystery*, in the context, a truth of our faith that we cannot understand but assent to nonetheless on the authority of God revealing, then indeed the deposit of our Catholic faith abounds in mysteries. The Trinity is such, certainly: How this can be—three Persons in one God—must always elude our understanding this side of Heaven's very special light. Moreover, the Trinity assumes a certain logical priority over the other mysteries. Belief in God the Son, for instance, is presupposed to belief in the Incarnation and thus to all mysteries pertaining to Christ. Yet, nonetheless, it is the Holy Eucharist, and not the Trinity, nor any other mystery, to which the Church has always assigned the title Mystery of Faith.

With the help of God's good grace, we assent to the mystery of the Trinity and so assent to a truth we cannot understand. But in regard to the Eucharist, we freely and gladly assent not only to a truth we cannot understand, but even to the contrary of what our senses tell us. What strikes our eyes, our taste, our sense of touch tells us that this particle is bread; the word of Christ affirms, "No, this is My body." As St. Thomas Aquinas writes in his hymn, *Adoro Te Devote*:

Sight, taste and touch are in thee deceived;
the ear alone most safely is believed.
I believe all the Son of God has spoken,
than truth's own word there is no truer spoken.

Belief in the Eucharist, in other words, makes greater demands on our faith than does any other mystery. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is named "Mystery of Faith."

There are, perhaps, other reasons, too, for this same fact. Perhaps it is the mystery of faith because it is so central to the practice of our faith, the mystery about which the exercise of our faith revolves. From the point of view of Christian worship, what would we do without it?

What holocausts, sin offerings, and peace offerings were, by Divine command, to the Chosen People of the Old Testament

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times, the Mass is for us. For the Mass, which consists essentially in the separate consecrations of the bread and wine, is our sacrifice. As Pope Paul VI expresses it:

What was carried out on Calvary is reenacted in wonderful fashion and is constantly recalled, and its saving power is applied to forgiving us the sins we commit each day.

Moreover, wherever the Eucharist is, there is the center of our spiritual life.

In itself, indeed, the Eucharist is a sign of Christian unity. For the wafer of bread is one wafer from many grains, and the cup of wine is pressed from many grapes. Each is in that way symbolic of Christ's Mystical Body, one body of many members, and of this body we are a part.

But the Eucharist does not stop with being a sign. As is true of all the sacraments, what it signifies, that it brings about. By the grace which is its effect, by the charity it fosters through the power of God, this sacrament does indeed unify ever and ever more closely those members of Christ's Mystical Body who are faithful to its devout and worthy reception.

There are, as we know from our grammar school days, seven sacraments belonging to the Church of Christ, bequeathed to her by her founder Himself. Each of them is a sign by which He sanctifies the souls of His followers. Insofar as all the sacraments so sanctify in this Church of Christ, all are, indeed, blessed.

Yet this title—Blessed Sacrament—we reserve for one sacrament and one only. The Eucharist is indeed preeminent over all the others, and enjoys the highest place in their hierarchy. Christ works through all the others; this one, actually, substantially contains that same Christ Himself who works through all the others.

All the other sacraments we treat with respect and reverence; this one we actually worship as God. For indeed it is Christ who is God under the appearances of bread and wine. Because we hold this with unshakable certitude of faith, we genuflect to the

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Host, treat every particle of every Host with greatest respect, and direct our attention, our requests, our needs, our acts of contrition for our sins, to Him who is contained therein.

We had occasion to mention earlier that the encyclical of Pope Paul VI was entitled *Mysterium Fidei* and we offered a reason or two why this title has been, and is, reserved for the Eucharist.

Actually, in the last couple of decades, the phrase *mysterium fidei* has had a somewhat strange history within the Mass itself. Many of us who are willing to date ourselves will remember when *mysterium fidei* was part of the form of the consecration of the wine itself: "*Hic est enim Calix Sanguinis mei, novi et aeterni testamenti: mysterium fidei: qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum.*" Then, sometime after the Second Vatican Council, the phrase was removed from the formula and placed after it, to be recited after the genuflection. But then a strange thing happened, at least in the English rendition: It became incorporated into the acclamation, "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." And then some acclamation was added, such as "Christ is risen" or one of the others, and the net impression of it all is that it is what follows the proclamation that is the mystery of faith and not the Holy Eucharist whose consecration has just preceded and which always has been regarded as the mystery of faith.

Encyclicals have a way of being occasioned by budding heterodoxy, and Pope Paul's *Mysterium Fidei* is no exception. The Pontiff speaks in this document of a doctrine appearing, spreading, which teaches in essence that the consecrated bread and consecrated wine are no more than a symbol of Christ's spiritual and guiding presence in His Church—the kind of presence He spoke of one time when he said: "For where there are two or three gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

In the face of this, Pope Paul reaffirms what has been the "constant teaching that the Church has always passed on to catechumens, and what the words that Christ used when He instituted the Holy Eucharist all require us to believe, namely that the Eucharist is the flesh of Our Savior Jesus Christ which suf-

ferred for our sins and which the Father in His loving kindness raised again."

Pope Paul, then, insists on affirming the Catholic doctrine as it has always been since the earliest Doctors of the Church first considered seriously what the Eucharist is, and as it was taught to you and me. In affirming the doctrine, he used a noun familiar to you and me, but most likely not to your children—transubstantiation. In *Mysterium Fidei*, His Holiness insists on this as exactly the right and fitting word to signify what the power of God effects at the consecration of the Mass: in the words of Pope Paul, "a marvelous conversion of the bread into the body and the whole substance of the wine into the blood of Christ." Through the words of consecration, the Pope insists, "Christ is really present, whole and entire, God and man," and "of the bread and wine nothing remains but the appearances."

In his encyclical, Pope Paul VI has occasion to allude to the liturgical changes then—in 1965—about to be instituted under the inspiration of the Second Vatican Council. He expresses their goal, the purpose or great good he hopes will be achieved by them:

We earnestly hope that the restoration of the Sacred Liturgy will provide abundant fruits in the form of Eucharistic devotion, so that the holy Church may, with this salvific sign of piety raised on high, make daily progress toward the full achievement of unity, inviting all Christians to a unity of faith and love, and drawing them to it gently, through the action of divine grace.

Now, 19 years later, we reflect on the changes that have been introduced and on the status of the Blessed Sacrament as it is regarded in the Church today, and we might just wonder about the extent to which Pope Paul's hopes have been realized. If anything, it seems that the Holy Eucharist is now less a "salvific sign of piety raised on high" than it was then, for the Blessed Sacrament—externally, at least—in the light of the various litur-

gical practices of the Church today is less revered than then, less respected than then, now less than then a mystery of faith uniting Catholics in one bond of belief and worship.

The various changes that have been introduced since the Second Vatican Council have been, taken singly, small ones indeed, and concerned with the accidental, not the essential. For each, as it has been introduced, sufficient reason has always been advanced. Yet taking these changes cumulatively, it seems that their net effect has been a gradual lessening of the reverence—in fact, of the proper sort of adoration—owed this august sacrament, owed indeed to God himself sacramentally present among us.

There have been many such changes, and we are all familiar with all of them. For the most part, each change has been in the direction of lesser reverence. As an instance of what I mean: It is no longer the Eucharist, as we mentioned before, that is dignified in the Mass by the title Mystery of the Faith, but some other aspect of our redemption. The words of consecration are no longer given the central place they once were given by being printed in letters extra large on the page of the priest's missal. People now generally receive communion standing, although kneeling is the more reverent posture, the posture appropriate to adoration. In many churches, the Blessed Sacrament is no longer in its place of honor in the center of the sanctuary but has been pushed back into the wings. Altars tend to be plain now, no longer things of beauty appropriate to the august sacrifice that is offered upon them.

Time there was when such reverence was manifested toward the Sacred Host and the contents of the chalice that only the consecrated hands of the priest touched such things. Modern catechisms, if they treat the Real Presence at all, pay but little heed. Lastly, people now—as it is an approved thing to do—receive the consecrated Hosts in their hands, thus treating them as they treat any other bread. Even the remission of the regulations regarding fasting, blessing though it is in many respects, tends to diminish the awe in which we ought to stand in the presence of this sacrament.

True enough, Catholic people receive communion in large

numbers. But, on the other hand, the number of confessions has markedly diminished in recent years. In face of this, we are led to wonder whether that same concern still reigns in the hearts of the people to assure, as well as they can, that their souls are properly adorned to receive the Holy One Whom they are about to receive.

THIS IS A HARD SAYING

by Charles De Koninck

*Abscondes eos in
abscondito faciei tuae
Ps. xxx*

I

A very influential contemporary author with a large readership wrote recently that he did not understand how some of the most intelligent people he knew could still believe in follies as distressful as those which are taught by the Catholic church. We will not be so simplistic as to reject this invective without distinctions. *Has not the good Lord told us that it has pleased him to save believers by the folly of preaching? that the doctrine of the cross is folly for those who perish? that what the world deems madness is what God has chosen to confound the wise? that the natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he cannot know them?*¹

Certain philosophers have thought that the relationship of properly divine truth to natural truth could be compared to a series converging towards its limit. But this comparison tends to confuse the incomparable otherness of these two truths. Prop-

Charles De Koninck, who died in 1964, was for many years the Dean of the Faculté de Philosophie at l'Université Laval in Quebec. He was as well a professeur auxiliaire of the Faculté de Théologie of the same university and a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame. This article contains the substance of a conference given at l'Hôtel-Dieu du Précieux Sang, Quebec, on the feast of the Holy Family, 1945.

The translation from the French is by Ronald P. McArthur.