



EUCHARISTIC AMAZEMENT

EXPERIENCE THE WONDER OF THE MASS

FATHER RANDY L. STICE



Praise for
Eucharistic Amazement

“What a beautiful journey, rich in Sacred Scripture and the witness of saints through the ages! Whatever your age, depth of learning or faith, Father Stice guides you to experience with childlike wonder Jesus’ gift of the Holy Eucharist and to see with fresh eyes of faith this loving Gift meant to change your life.”

—Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz,
Archbishop Emeritus of Louisville

“Every Eucharistic Revival needs to be rooted in Eucharistic amazement. Incorporating accessible insights from great saints and the liturgy itself, Father Stice opens accessible paths toward ‘a sense of awe, love, and childlike trust in the goodness and power of the Eucharistic Christ, and a desire never to be parted from him.’”

—David D. Spesia, Executive Director,
USCCB Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis

“*Eucharistic Amazement* lives up to its title by rekindling awe for the tremendous gift of Christ’s presence under the appearances of bread and wine. These reflections have encouraged me to more consciously prepare to receive special graces tied to the liturgical year.”

—Sara Perla, The Catholic Project,
Catholic University of America

“With insightful reflections and some lessons from the saints, Father Stice reminds us of how we are unified and transformed by love in an encounter with the gift of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.”

—Cardinal Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of
The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, DC

“We need a deep sense of ‘Eucharistic amazement,’ as Saint John Paul II would say, in order to taste the abundance of life that Jesus promised. However, we oftentimes suffer from ‘Eucharistic numbness.’ Father Randy’s book helps to reduce that disconnect, so we can experience all that we’re made for.”

—Tanner Kalina, Catholic Evangelist, Cofounder of
the *Saints Alive* podcast on the Hallow app,
author of *Aching for Greatness*

“With unequaled ease and singular theological precision, Father Stice has written a most precious book. The author reminds us that we are created for the Eucharist, for communion with Jesus Christ, and how ‘greatly we desire Him’ (Saint Teresa of Avila). This classic is suited for both private edification and parish renewal. It is equally timely and timeless, necessary and most life-giving reading for every Christian. Enthusiastically recommended!”

—Rev. Emery de Gaál, PhD, Professor of Dogmatic
Theology, University of St. Mary of the Lake

“Father Randy interweaves the Catholic intellectual, liturgical, and theological tradition of ages with the practice of real saints and suggestions for concrete helpful practices by lay people today—thus engaging minds and moving hearts.

Eucharistic Amazement is depth and richness of content delivered with brilliant simplicity.”

—Carmen Fernández Aguinaco, Former Multicultural Specialist of the Secretariat for Divine Worship, USCCB

“Of the many words used by Catholics to describe the Mass, ‘amazing’ may rarely be heard—unfortunately. But it is this Eucharistic ‘amazement’ that Saint John Paul II sought to enkindle in his last encyclical. Father Stice is thus in good company with his present work, and John Paul II would surely appreciate the book’s eye-opening insights—as should all Catholics.”

—Christopher Carstens, Editor, *Adoremus Bulletin*

“Father Randy brilliantly lifts us out of the tragic fog of Eucharistic confusion so we can clearly see Christ present in the here and now. This study provides a life-changing path for those seeking to discover the truth of God’s amazing gifts to be found within our liturgy.”

—Jimmy Dee, Director of Evangelization and Faith Formation, Tennessee Knights of Columbus; Vice Chairman, Board of the Catholic Men’s Leadership Alliance/Heroic Men

“Wow—Father Randy Stice hit a home run with this enlightening, easy-to-read journey of the Real Presence of the Eucharist. Practical applications coupled with a plethora of references from the Bible and the saints allow readers a true opportunity to grow in their faith and nurture their Eucharistic amazement.”

—Dickie Sompayrac, President, Knoxville Catholic High School; 2024 Recipient of the Lead. Learn. Proclaim. Award from the National Catholic Educational Association

“*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, charged those with pastoral duties to assist believers in achieving full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy. Father Stice has taken up this duty admirably by helping Catholics explore the mysteries of the liturgy through the contemplative insights of saints and doctors throughout Church history—including John Chrysostom (d. 407), Augustine (d. 430), Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), and Faustina Kowalska (d. 1938). *Eucharistic Amazement* opens a door into the transhistorical nature of the liturgy that unites all of us with the communion of saints.”

— Dr. C. Colt Anderson, Full Professor of Christian Spirituality, Fordham University



EUCCHARISTIC AMAZEMENT

EUCHARISTIC AMAZEMENT

Experience the Wonder of the Mass

FATHER RANDY L. STICE

FOREWORD BY LAWRENCE FEINGOLD



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Foreword

THE TOTAL GIFT OF himself that Christ gives us in the Eucharist ought to lead us “to profound amazement and gratitude,” an amazement that should “always fill the Church,” as Saint John Paul II says in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.¹ John Paul II’s goal in writing this Eucharistic encyclical is to “rekindle this Eucharistic ‘amazement.’”² All of us need this rekindling, because we are all tempted to take for granted the riches we are given in the Eucharist.

The beginning of philosophy, according to Plato and Aristotle, is wonder, which is enkindled by reflecting on what transcends our understanding. This is even more true for theology. Theological wonder is caused by the gap between what our eyes see and the magnitude of what we recognize by our faith. Amazement in the power of the Eucharist led the martyrs of Abitene, who were arrested during the persecution of Diocletian for going to Sunday Mass, to say, “Without Sunday, we cannot live.” Eucharistic wonder is nourished by growth in Eucharistic faith, which in turn needs to be

nurtured by prayer rooted in sound catechesis and the faith of the saints. We encounter all of this abundantly in this admirable book by Father Randy Stice.

Eucharistic wonder begins with the Real Presence: Jesus is here with his entire personal being in every tabernacle, and we receive him—Body, Blood, soul, and divinity—in every Holy Communion. The sacrifice of the Mass is no less a source of wonder. Although we were born two thousand years too late to stand at the foot of the cross with Mary and John, Jesus instituted the Eucharist so that his paschal mystery can bridge the centuries to become mysteriously present in every Mass, enabling us to truly participate in his sacrifice today.

Chapter 4 speaks of the marvel that the faithful, through their royal priesthood, participate in their own way in offering Christ's sacrifice to God the Father, a sacrifice made present on the altar through the sacramental words of the ministerial priest acting in the person of Christ. The faithful participate in Christ's sacrifice by offering themselves and their loved ones with him, for we are a part of his Body. The Second Vatican Council, in its document on the priesthood, says that "priests must instruct their people to offer to God the Father the Divine Victim in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and to join to it the offering of their own lives."³ How many of the faithful have learned this from their priests? Father Stice takes this responsibility seriously, and he helps the faithful to follow the teaching of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary,

through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. . . . By offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves.⁴

Through the Mass we also come to participate in the mysteries of Christ's life that we celebrate in the liturgical year, as Father Stice explains in chapter 5. We are given graces to grow in longing for his coming in Advent, to be born anew with him at Christmas, to be transfigured with his transfiguration, to be vigilant in temptation, pray, fast, and do works of mercy with him during Lent, to rise with him to new life at Easter, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit with the apostles at Pentecost.

The best way to foster Eucharistic devotion is to look to Mary as the model of Eucharistic amazement. John Paul II ends *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* with a profound meditation on what it would have been like for Mary to participate in the Eucharist and receive her Son. Through Holy Communion the faithful receive in their bodies the same humanity of the Word that Mary received in her womb at the Annunciation and welcomed anew in every Holy Communion. Our "Amen" with which we receive him, like Mary's fiat, should express our wonder that the Creator, having become man, wishes to become present where we are and dwell in our bodies. Mary also exemplifies the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist, as she offered her Son while standing at the foot of the cross on Calvary. What Mary offered then—her Son as the Divine

Victim to atone for the sins of the world—is offered by the Church in every Mass. Mary would have grown in grace and intimacy with her Son in an unparalleled way through every Holy Communion, as she received the Son whom she had nurtured in her womb and accompanied to Calvary. Let us ask Mary to help us to share in her Eucharistic life ever more deeply.

LAWRENCE FEINGOLD

NOTES

1. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), 5.

2. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6.

3. Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), The Holy See, Vatican.va. 5 https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.

4. Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), The Holy See, Vatican.va, 48. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.



Introduction

THIS BOOK IS THE fruit of my personal path to discovering a sense of Eucharistic amazement. I was raised a Protestant and was first drawn to the Eucharist while teaching English and sharing the Gospel in Communist China. It was while there that I began to read Catholic classics and was especially influenced by *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. The last section is on the Eucharist, and Thomas' emphasis on the Real Presence, the importance of holiness, and devout preparation started me thinking about the Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper.

Sacred Scripture was key to my reflection on the Eucharist, especially the Bread of Life discourse in John 6. I was attracted by the intimate personal relationship Jesus promised: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (Jn 6:56). These words of Jesus in John 6:53 struck me powerfully: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." I remember thinking

to myself that this was not something that I wanted to be wrong about!

At the time I was particularly drawn to two Catholic figures, Saint John Paul II and Saint Teresa of Calcutta. Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist prompted probing questions: If Catholics were wrong and Protestants were right about the Eucharist, then where were the Protestant figures that command the same universal respect that these two Catholics do? And more than that, are John Paul II and Mother Teresa examples of the life imparted by Jesus through receiving the Eucharist? These questions challenged and unsettled me.

When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published in 1994, I bought a copy, eager to compare what I had heard about the Eucharist growing up as a Protestant with what the Church actually taught. I was particularly persuaded by the biblical support for the Catholic understanding of the Real Presence. I also began to wonder: If the Catholic Church was wrong about its understanding of the Eucharist, why did God wait fifteen hundred years for the Protestant Reformation to correct it? I had no good answer to this question. I was attending an Episcopal church just prior to my reception into the Catholic Church. Before each service I meditated on a series of Bible passages on the Eucharist that I had assembled, including John 6:51, 53–56; First Corinthians 10:16; 11:28. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, these verses of Scripture as well as conversations with a local priest led me to faith in the Real Presence of Christ. I was received into the Catholic Church in 1997.

Over the next several years I attended Mass daily, continued to read and pray, and began to discern a vocation, first to

religious life, and then to diocesan priesthood. I was accepted as a seminarian by the Diocese of Knoxville in the fall of 2002 and entered Mundelein Seminary in December of that year. During my first week I suffered two heart attacks four days apart, but I recovered and four years later was ordained a priest in June 2007. Later that summer I completed a Licentiate in Sacred Theology, writing my thesis on Saint Teresa of Avila. I was appointed the Director of the Office of Worship and Liturgy in 2009 and earned an MA in Liturgy from the Liturgical Institute in 2011. After serving as an associate pastor and pastor, I worked at the USCCB in the Secretariat of Divine Worship from 2017 to 2020, after which I retired and returned to Knoxville.

Priesthood has only deepened my love and awe for the Eucharistic Christ. The celebration of the Mass, the highlight of each day, continually deepens my personal encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. Offering Mass for a variety of groups—parishes, religious communities, different cultural and language groups, Catholic school students from elementary to high school, USCCB staff, pilgrimages—has helped me see new ways in which our Eucharistic Lord offers himself to all. My appointment as the diocesan director of liturgy gave me the opportunity to read, reflect, write, and teach about the Mass, further enriching my experience of the Eucharist as an encounter with the Trinity. Every day I say with the Apostle Paul, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9:15)

I conceived the idea for *Eucharistic Amazement* while preparing a homily for the feast of Saint John Neumann (January 5). The prayers for the Mass—the Collect, the Prayer over the

Offerings, and the Prayer after Communion—struck me with their petition that we experience *the power of the sacrament*, a phrase that, with slight variations, occurs over fifty times in the Roman Missal. Very quickly I had formulated an outline for a book on the Eucharist that would bring together my experience in the field of liturgy with my work on Saint Teresa of Avila, my devotional reading of Saint Faustina’s *Diary*, my interest in the Eucharistic writings of Saint John Chrysostom, and Pius Parsch’s discussion of what he called the “peculiar” graces of each celebration of the Mass.

This book will take you on a journey. In Chapter 1 we will begin by reflecting on Christ’s personal and powerful Presence in the Eucharist and study several examples of the Eucharistic amazement of Christians down through the centuries. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between Christ’s earthly ministry and his action in the Mass, as well as the importance of faith, knowledge, and love in our participation in Mass. Saint Teresa of Avila, in Chapter 3, shares the graces of her encounters with Christ in the Eucharist, which will lead to a discussion in Chapter 4 of how we encounter the Trinity in the Mass, focusing on the renewal of the Covenant in the Mass.

The specific way in which God makes present the specific graces of each liturgical season and feast of the liturgical year is the subject of Chapter 5. Two liturgical pioneers will lead the way in this study, followed by Pope Pius XII, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. To illustrate this teaching, in Chapter 6 we will be guided once more by a saint, this time by Saint Faustina Kowalska, the Apostle of Divine Mercy, who shares her

experience of the graces of the different seasons and feasts of the liturgical year. In Chapter 7 we delve more deeply into the parts of the Mass and reflect on how we can prepare ourselves to receive the unique graces of each liturgical celebration. In Chapter 8, we turn to the compelling witness of the Doctor of the Eucharist, Saint John Chrysostom, concluding in Chapter 9 by pondering what it will mean for our whole life to be transformed by Eucharistic amazement.

The purpose of this book is for you to cultivate a sense of Eucharistic amazement, primarily by presenting the teaching of the Church and the saints on the Eucharist. However, we are transformed when this information is combined with experience. For this reason, in the sections Nurturing Eucharistic Amazement which you will find in each chapter, I suggest practical applications of the material, ways in which you can put what you have read into practice either in preparation for Mass, during Mass, or after Mass, to deepen your own spirit of Eucharistic amazement.

Finally, a note on sources for the Fathers of the Church quoted in this book. In general, quotations are taken from primary sources, but I've made two exceptions. Wherever possible I have chosen to use material from Church Fathers as quoted in sources such as a papal document or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, because referencing such magisterial sources indicates the enduring value of the teaching of the Fathers and also provides a consistent approach to the mysteries of our faith.



Abbreviations

- EE *Ecclesia de Eucharistia (On the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church)*, John Paul II, 2003.
- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 1995.
- LF *Lumen Fidei (On Faith)*, Francis, 2013.
- MD *Mediator Dei (On the Sacred Liturgy)*, Pius XII, 1947.
- MF *Mysterium Fidei (On the Holy Eucharist)*, Paul VI, 1965.
- SC *Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)*, Second Vatican Council, 1963.
- SacCar *Sacramentum Caritatis (On the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission)*, Benedict XVI, 2007.
- VD *Verbum Domini (On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church)*, Benedict XVI, 2010.



CHAPTER I

Does God Act Today?

And so all that the Son of God did and taught for the world's reconciliation is not for us simply a matter of past history. Here and now we experience his power at work among us.

SAINT LEO THE GREAT, *SERMON XII ON THE PASSION*

THE APOSTLE PAUL FIRST preached the Gospel to the Thessalonians in the face of serious opposition and their acceptance of the Gospel came with great suffering. They persevered, however, despite continued persecution. In many parts of the world persecution is still a reality. To encourage the Thessalonians, and us, Saint Paul recalled for them their first experience of the Gospel. "Our message of the gospel," he wrote, "came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). However, many today do not share Paul's certainty about the

power of the Gospel to transform our lives and draw us into the love of the Trinity. In *The Light of Faith*, Pope Francis wrote, “Our culture has lost its sense of God’s tangible presence and activity in our world. We think that God is to be found in the beyond, on another level of reality, far removed from our everyday relationships.”⁵ Even Christians can struggle to maintain a sense of God’s presence and activity in the world. We too may believe that God only exists in a realm far from us. Although we know God exists, we may doubt his active and loving presence in our world, in our parish, and in our own lives.

What if it were true that God was not acting in the world? If this were true then his love would not be real or powerful, his promises would be meaningless, and our faith empty. This is certainly not the faith that Christ entrusted to his Church and that has been faithfully passed on through the centuries. Almost two thousand years ago Saint Paul reminded the Corinthians that “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4–5). We believe in a God whose love is real and powerful, a God we can encounter, who is truly Emmanuel, “God with us” (see Mt 1:23), a God who is personally and powerfully involved in our world and in our lives.

There are many ways in which God acts in our world today. In this book we will consider specifically how God acts in the Mass, which is “a meeting of God’s children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit.”⁶ The Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist “the source and summit of the

Christian life,” in which Christ is present and acts in a number of ways: in the proclamation of Sacred Scripture (his word), in the assembly (his Body), in the priest (his minister), but “most especially in the Eucharistic species.”⁷ In the most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, “Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity” (CCC 1413). Hidden under the appearances of bread and wine, Christ is personally present and continues to act today as he did during his earthly ministry.

I Am with You Always

The transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is both miracle and mystery, something that we can never fully comprehend and explain. For two thousand years the Church has diligently reflected on this mystery and has deepened her understanding of Christ’s Eucharistic presence. We can summarize his Eucharistic presence in this way: the Eucharist is the *substantial* presence of Christ’s *glorified Body* under the *appearances* of bread and wine discerned by *faith*. Let’s look more closely at the four italicized terms that indicate four key aspects of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

First, Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is a *substantial* presence. Saint Paul VI explained that “the way in which Christ becomes present in this Sacrament is through the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into his Body and of the whole substance of the wine into his Blood.” The

Church calls this “unique and truly wonderful conversion”⁸ transubstantiation, the complete change of one substance into another substance. The result of this complete change of the substance of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is presence.

This presence is called “real”—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be “real” too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present. (CCC 1374)

All that remains of the bread and wine are the *outward characteristics*—appearance, texture, and taste.

Furthermore, the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not his Body during his earthly ministry before the resurrection, but *his resurrected Body*. “The flesh of the Son of Man, given as food,” explained Saint John Paul II, “is his Body in its glorious state after the resurrection.”⁹ To appreciate the significance of this, recall the Gospel accounts of Christ’s resurrection appearances. Sometimes his disciples recognized him, but other times they did not. He wasn’t a ghost or a spirit—he ate with them and he still bore the wounds from the crucifixion. However, he could also suddenly appear in a locked room. What these encounters convey is the mysterious yet powerful reality of Christ’s resurrected and glorified Body. Through the centuries the Church has echoed Saint Paul’s desire to know the power of Christ’s resurrection (see Phil 3:10). Because the Eucharist is Christ’s resurrected Body, wrote Saint John Paul II, “with

the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the ‘secret’ of the resurrection” (EE 18).

Finally, Christ’s presence in the Eucharist can only be discerned by *faith*, not by our senses. Our senses tell us that what we receive in the Eucharist is bread and wine. But our faith discerns the truth with absolute certainty, a faith that is based on the words of Christ: “This is my body,” “This is my blood” (Mk 14:22, 24). The Church has always believed and taught this truth. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (†386) instructed the new Christians, “Do not see in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said that they are his Body and Blood; *faith assures you of this*, though your senses suggest otherwise.”¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom (†407) encouraged his flock to trust the words of Christ:

Let us submit to God in all things and not contradict him, even if what he says seems to contradict our reason and intellect; *let his word prevail over our reason* and intellect. Let us act in this way with regard to the Eucharistic mysteries, and not limit our attention just to what can be perceived by the senses, but instead hold fast to his words. For his word cannot deceive.¹¹

A few decades later, Saint Cyril of Alexandria (†444) wrote, “Do not doubt whether this is true, but rather receive the words of the Savior in faith, for since he is the truth, he cannot lie.”¹²

Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is different from any other presence in the world. In the Eucharist he is “present . . . in a totally unique way. . . . Jesus is not present in the Eucharist as a ‘thing’ or an object, but as a person.”¹³ Christ’s

presence in the Eucharist, therefore, is a *personal* presence. In the Eucharist Christ fulfills the promise he made to the apostles, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). In the Eucharist Christ is truly Emmanuel, God with us.

Eucharistic Amazement Through the Centuries

Christians throughout the ages have marveled at the power of Christ’s personal presence in the Eucharist and have proclaimed it in poetry, in theology, and with their very lives. In the year 304, forty-nine Christians in the small village of Abitene in modern-day Tunisia were arrested one Sunday during Mass because they had defied the Emperor Diocletian’s order forbidding the celebration of the Eucharist. When asked why they had disobeyed the Emperor, one of them replied, “Without Sunday, we cannot live.” In other words, life without the Eucharist, without coming together on Sunday to celebrate the Mass, would be impossible. For their devotion to the Eucharist, these Christians of Abitene were tortured and martyred. These brave Christians, amazed at the power of the Eucharist they had experienced, placed the Eucharist at the very center of their lives.

In his autobiography *Confessions*, Saint Augustine (†430) described a personal experience of the transforming power of the Eucharist. Addressing God, he recalled the occasion when it seemed “as if I heard your voice from on high: ‘I am the food of strong men; grow and you will feed

on me; nor will you change me like ordinary food into your flesh, but you will be changed into me.”¹⁴ Commenting on this passage, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “It is not the Eucharistic food that is changed into us, but rather we who are mysteriously transformed by it. Christ nourishes us by uniting us to himself; ‘he draws us into himself.’”¹⁵ This transformative power of the Eucharist is another source of amazement.

Saint Francis of Assisi (†1226) was so awestruck at the mystery of Christ’s hidden presence that he broke into ecstatic poetry:

Let the whole world tremble;
 let heaven exult
 when Christ, the Son of the Living God,
 is on the altar in the hands of the priest.
 O admirable height and stupendous condescension!
 O humble sublimity! O sublime humility!
 That the Lord of the universe,
 God and the Son of God,
 so humbles himself that for our salvation
 he hides himself under a morsel of bread.
 Consider, brothers, the humility of God
 and pour out your hearts before him.

Before the miracle of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, a manifestation of his unfathomable humility, the world shakes, heaven exults, and we are moved to pour out our hearts to him.

The hymn *Adoro Te, Devote*, attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas (†1274) and translated by the Catholic priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, is a marvel of devotional theology.

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore
 Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
 See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
 Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
 How says trusty hearing? that shall be believed;
 What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;
 Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.

These eight lines explain the mystery of Christ's presence. "Godhead here in hiding"—the glorified Christ, united with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden under the appearances of bread and wine, appearances which are "bare shadows, shape and nothing more." We cannot discern Christ's presence with our senses, for "seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived." Only "trusty hearing"—faith in the words of Christ—assures us of Christ's presence: "What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do; Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true."

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (†1897), the Little Flower, marveled at the love of Jesus revealed in the Eucharist. "It is not to remain in a golden ciborium that he comes to us *each day* from heaven," she wrote, "it's to find another heaven, infinitely more dear to him than the first: the heaven of our soul, made to his image, the living temple of the adorable Trinity!"¹⁶ In this one sentence Thérèse indicates something very important about God and about us. The Eucharist reveals to us the depth of God's love for us and his desire for relationship with us. And it reveals the immense dignity that God has bestowed on us: each of us, made in his image, is a living temple and a unique heaven that God desires to fill with his presence. Can

anything testify more eloquently to the dignity that we have in God's eyes? Despite our frailty and brokenness, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit want to make of our souls another heaven. This too enkindles in us an awe before the Eucharist.

Venerable Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan (†2002), a Vietnamese cardinal, offers a very different but equally compelling witness of Eucharistic amazement. On August 15, 1975, the feast of the Assumption, he was arrested by the Communist government of Vietnam and imprisoned for thirteen years. Through all those years, with wine and hosts that had been smuggled into the prison and using his hand for a chalice, he continued to celebrate Mass every day. He and his Catholic companions made small containers from cigarette packages in which they placed the Blessed Sacrament to share among the Catholic prisoners. "They all knew that Jesus was among them, he who could heal all their physical and mental suffering. At night, the prisoners took turns for adoration; Jesus helped us in a tremendous way with his silent presence."¹⁷ Cardinal Van Thuan spent nine of his thirteen years in solitary confinement. The Masses he celebrated during those nine years he considers "the most beautiful Masses of my life."¹⁸

Fourth century martyrs in Abitene, an ancient bishop of North Africa (Saint Augustine), the founder of a religious order that exalted Lady Poverty (Saint Francis of Assisi), a young French Carmelite nun (Saint Thérèse of Lisieux), and a persecuted shepherd (Cardinal Van Thuan) have expressed with their words and their lives what Saint John Paul II called "Eucharistic 'amazement.'" Reflecting on the witness of these Christians, we can say that Eucharistic amazement is *a sense of*

awe, love, and childlike trust in the goodness and power of the Eucharistic Christ, and a desire never to be parted from him. Saint John Paul II ardently desired that this amazement “should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist” (EE 5).



Nurturing Eucharistic Amazement

Christians throughout the centuries have witnessed to their faith in the Eucharist by expressing *a sense of awe, love, and childlike trust in the goodness and power of the Eucharistic Christ and a desire never to be parted from him.* Here are some suggestions for cultivating, expressing, and sharing Eucharistic amazement in your own life.

- ✦ You may want to imitate Saint Francis of Assisi by composing a poem expressing your amazement.
- ✦ You may want to follow Saint Thomas Aquinas' example and write a hymn or song.
- ✦ Children (and adults) can share their amazement through a drawing or painting.
- ✦ Two of our examples, the Abitene martyrs and Cardinal Van Thuan and his companions, faced being deprived of the Mass. Considering their perseverance and our experience of the COVID pandemic, you may want to begin attending a weekday Mass in addition to the weekly Sunday Mass.

- ✦ For personal reflection: How does the Mass make a difference in your life?
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Two Moments of Eucharistic Amazement in the Mass

The Mass itself forms us in this Eucharistic amazement especially during two moments: the Consecration and the Communion Rite. The Consecration is the moment when the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. The priest first holds his hands over the bread and wine and calls down upon them the Holy Spirit, and then takes each into his hands while Jesus says through him—“This is my Body,” “This is my Blood.” While still a cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI wrote of this:

The moment when the Lord comes down and transforms bread and wine to become his Body and Blood cannot fail to stun, to the very core of their being, those who participate in the Eucharist by faith and prayer. . . . The Consecration is the moment of God’s great *actio* [action] in the world for us.¹⁹

The actions that accompany this moment express this amazement. The priest leads the assembly in worship, first raising the Host and showing it to the assembly (the elevation), then genuflecting in adoration. He does the same with the chalice.

Bells are often rung at this moment to signal the miracle that has just taken place, and at solemn celebrations the Body and Blood are incensed at the elevation.

The Communion Rite is another moment of Eucharistic amazement. It has always been accompanied by gestures and postures that express reverence and love, for in the words of Saint Augustine, “No one eats that flesh without first adoring it; we should sin were we not to adore it” (SacCar 66). Theodore of Mopsuestia (†428) told his congregation to approach the altar looking down: “By looking downwards you signify that you are offering God fitting adoration, and giving thanks for receiving the body of the King, who became the Lord of all through His union with the divine nature, and who is worshipped as a Lord by the whole creation.”²⁰ In the sixth century monks approached Communion with prostration and genuflection, a practice that spread more widely in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Today we bow before receiving the Body and Blood of Christ because, explains Saint John Paul II, “If, in the presence of this mystery, reason experiences its limits, the heart, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, clearly sees the response that is demanded, and bows low in adoration and unbounded love” (EE 62).

Conclusion

Does God act in the world today? Indeed he does, and in an altogether unique way in the Mass. In the Eucharist we encounter Christ fully present as he is now, the glorified only-begotten Son of God, personally present yet hidden,

perceived only by faith, powerfully active. Christians down the centuries have encountered Christ's transforming presence in the Eucharist and have left descriptions and explanations of their experiences that continue to instruct and encourage the Church's Eucharistic amazement. In the following pages we will explore how the Mass is a unique encounter with "God's tangible and powerful love which really does act in history and determines its final destiny" (LF 17).

NOTES

5. Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), 17 (hereafter cited in text as LF).

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1153 (hereafter cited in text as CCC).

7. Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), The Holy See, Vatican.va, 7 (hereafter cited in text as SC). https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

8. Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), The Holy See, Vatican.va, 46 (hereafter cited in text as MF). https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p_vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html.

9. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), 18 [Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, IV, 6: SCh 126, 138] (hereafter cited in text as EE).

10. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 15 [Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, IV, 6: SCh 126, 138]. Italics added.

11. Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 17 [St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew*, 82.4; PG 58.743].
12. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1381 [St. Thomas Aquinas, STh III, 75, 1; cf. Paul VI, MF 18; St. Cyril of Alexandria, In Luc. 22,19; PG 72, 912; cf. Paul VI, MF 18].
13. Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Eucharist: Our Sanctification*, rev. ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 82.
14. *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary T. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 71.
15. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007), 70 (hereafter cited in text as SacCar).
16. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd ed., trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 104.
17. Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, *Five Loaves and Two Fish* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 35.
18. Van Thuan, *Five Loaves*, 36.
19. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 212.
20. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*. Translated by Alphonse Mingana. Woodbrook Studies 6, 1993. Public Domain.