

Tract for the Times 2

The Holy Eucharist as Contemplative Encounter with God

AT THE CHURCH of San Domenico in Naples, and now in his last years, St. Thomas Aquinas frequently visited a side chapel of St. Nicholas in the early hours before Matins. The story is told that Dominic of Caserta, the Dominican church sacristan, hid one night to observe Thomas in prayer and saw him elevate “almost two cubits in the air” while Thomas was weeping and speaking to the crucifix on the wall of the chapel. The words Thomas spoke in prayer were not kept, but the words from the figure of Christ on the Cross did enter into history. “Thomas, you have written well about me. What reward will you have?” And Thomas quickly replied: “Lord, nothing but yourself.”¹

William of Tocco, the early biographer of St. Thomas Aquinas, recounted that Thomas was writing the third part of the *Summa theologiae* at this time in Naples. In fact, it is possible by that night that Thomas had completed his magnificent treatise on the Holy Eucharist in questions 73–83, and plausible as well that Thomas wept in front of that crucifix with a sense of the inadequacy of human words before the unutterable mystery of the Lord’s Presence in the Eucharist. The reply of Thomas to what he might want as a reward—only you, Lord, nothing else—is a fitting reminder to all who come to love the Eucharist that there is nothing more desirable than our immediate contact with the bodily Presence of Jesus Christ himself in this unique Sacrament.

The mystery of the Eucharist invites us to ponder a revealed truth that calls for a deep response of soul. For the fervent Catholic believer, we might say that a detached spirit of discussion toward the Eucharist is

¹ James Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas D’Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 316.

inappropriate, even unworthy. The mystery is too attractive, too personal and privileged, to remain confined within the bounds of a doctrinal examination. Serious thought about the Eucharist brushes up against the sublime transcendence of a mystery that is nonetheless physically near us with every entry we make through the doorway of a Catholic church. Our divine Lord is in our midst, never far away, and we are invited to touch and taste, to draw closer in love, to consume and adore. It is a perennial Catholic truth that doctrine and spirituality feed each other, unite and reinforce each other. This is especially true in regard to the Eucharist. As such, a kind of contemplative appreciation for the theological truths pertinent to the doctrine of the Eucharist can open our soul to a different personal engagement with Our Lord's gift of himself in this sacramental reality. After pondering the Eucharistic truth more fully, we may find ourselves, before the Blessed Sacrament, or in the reception of Holy Communion, more often silent in his Presence, aware that we want only him, nothing more, longing in the immediacy of his Presence only for himself.

Certain aspects of Catholic teaching on the Eucharist, clarified in the Tradition, deserve particular notice. Spiritual fruits and a deeper love for the Eucharist may follow. I recall a conversation with a Catholic permanent deacon, a convert from Lutheranism, where he had been a minister of his church, who insisted that he already believed in the Real Presence of the Eucharist long before his conversion to Catholicism. In making this claim, he was faithful to his Lutheran forebears. Martin Luther, in apostasy, affirmed the reality of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ present after the words of "consecration" in the Lutheran service. What the Lutheran teaching also proclaims, however, is that the Body and Blood of Christ are present in the *reality* of the bread and wine on an altar. In this heretical view the bread and wine do not undergo a change from being bread and wine, but rather become containers, as it were, vehicles for the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ to be received. The evident distortion of Catholic doctrine in this illustration—by contrast, bread and wine in a Catholic Mass are changed entirely, completely, totally, in their substantial reality into the Body and Blood of Christ—conveys an important truth that may not be honored sufficiently among Catholics. That is to say, the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a distinct teaching from the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Even as the latter truth, in Catholic understanding, is the source of the former truth, they are nonetheless capable of being sadly separated, as in the case of Luther, the one truth believed without the other also held in divine faith. The evidence of this unfortunate approach toward the Eucharist is perhaps

observed in every casual and disrespectful treatment of the sacred Host when placed in the hands of communicants at Mass. Unfortunately, belief in the Real Presence may also be absent in such cases.

The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, while distinct as a doctrine, is nonetheless supernaturally conjoined to the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In one sense transubstantiation can be called a term of precise theological explication. An offshoot, as it were, of Aristotelian metaphysical terminology, dating back at least to 1140, and as such long before St. Thomas Aquinas employed it in the third part of the *Summa theologiae*, “transubstantiation,” for all its abstract connotation, is a term referring to nothing less than the miraculous. A divine act takes place in every Mass whereby the bread and wine as particular substances on the altar change at the words of the consecration into the Body and Blood of Christ. The realization of God’s Presence *in act* at the altar, and then of his immediate Presence after the consecration in the Person of Jesus Christ, is a contemplation of mystical realities. Transubstantiation itself is an act of God piercing the fabric of temporal reality at each Mass. Our senses are blind in that hour, prostrate with incomprehension before the action of the eternal God penetrating time and entering a place. We are summoned to adore that sacred instant in the Mass when the consecration takes place inasmuch as God acts in that moment. The Mass as a direct act of God demands as such a sacred awareness beyond mere reverence. Our familiarity with the Mass ought not to make us forget how men in the past remained overwhelmed at the action of God parting the waters of the Red Sea, or when they saw a dead man named Lazarus walk out of a tomb, or when they met a Virgin who had conceived a child at the miraculous condescension of God. We are in the presence of the miraculous at each Mass no less than men who witnessed the divine miracles recounted in Scripture.

The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist likewise calls for a further recognition in faith. We are in the presence of another distinct miracle at the lifting of the Host in Mass, or kneeling before a tabernacle or monstrance. We see bread elevated in the priest’s hands and raised above the altar, and yet there is no bread. The appearance of bread continues only by a miraculous intervention of God. Accidents, in Aristotelian metaphysics, cannot perdure without the substance in which they inhere also continuing in existence to sustain them. In the Eucharist the accidents of the substance of bread, their appearance and physical qualities, remain only inasmuch as a divine act keeps them miraculously in place, since no bread and wine exist after the consecration, only the reality of the Body, Blood,

Soul, and Divinity of the Person of Jesus Christ under the sacramental sign. Our worship of the Host is never directed at what can be considered the sacred object before our eyes, but must pass beyond the veil of the appearance of bread to the reality of Our Lord himself. The Eucharist is thus not a sacred *thing* deserving respect, as sometimes may be unreflectively thought, but the invisible Presence of Our Lord in our immediate vicinity. The Host as sacred Bread serves as a sacramental sign allowing us to adore Our Lord in prayer and to consume him for the sake of union with him in Holy Communion.

Another truth of Eucharistic doctrine can animate our spiritual awareness. Even as he is immediately present to us in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ does not leave heaven, but remains in his glorified Body at the right hand of the Father. He does not descend down to the altar at the consecration as though he departed from a location. In the countless Catholic Masses offered each day, he does not spread himself far and wide across the world as though his Body is multiplied and expanded in dimension. The proper understanding is that with each Mass he lifts up the bread and wine on the altar into himself at the consecration, changing them into himself, so that they no longer exist as bread and wine but have become himself under the sacramental sign. The sacramental signs of bread and wine are in effect a sacred veil hiding the miracle perpetually in our midst in Catholic life. In the Presence of the Eucharist, we already cross a threshold into eternity even in this life. We kneel before the Real Presence of Jesus Christ as he lives now glorified in heaven. This truth imposes a demand in faith that we grasp the special privilege of any time spent in prayer in a Catholic church before a tabernacle. We are with Our Lord and God as he is in heaven, even in our distracted or troubled circumstances of mind, body, and soul.

The importance of the sacrificial action taking place in the Mass and extending beyond the Mass in its effects upon us is likewise a profound truth of the Eucharist. The notion of sacrifice has a precise meaning in the reality of this Sacrament. The sacrifice in this case is not a reenactment of the death of Jesus at Calvary, as though his suffering and death are repeated with each Mass. In that sense it is not proper to describe the Mass as a kind of mystical re-presentation of the dying of Christ. But neither is the Mass a mere commemoration of the past event with a link to Calvary only in remembrance. Rather, at each Mass Jesus as he lives now in heaven is the unseen Priest who offers himself sacrificially as a Victim to the Father for the redemption of the world. He did this once in a bloody sacrifice at Calvary, but he continues in heaven in his glorified state to make the same offering of himself as a sacrificial Victim. This offering takes place as the

priest at the altar pronounces the words of consecration *in persona Christi*. The sacrificial action contained in the words of consecration spoken by a priest belongs to Jesus Christ the High Priest. It is real and effective as a sacrifice because the One offering it is truly present in the priest and is acting in a sacrificial manner by offering himself as a Victim. The twofold, separate consecration of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ places before our senses a sacramental re-presentation of this sacrificial immolation, a real image of what took place at Calvary: the separation of Jesus's Blood from his Body in a sacrificial immolation on the Cross. The Blood "poured out for many," repeated in the words of consecration at each Mass, invokes the reality of the death undergone by Our Lord as he ended his earthly life. Jesus Christ crucified, the Lamb who was once slain, who remains even in heaven marked by the wounds of his Passion, is really present at the altar after the consecration. We are in the presence, as St. Thomas Aquinas affirms, of "Christ himself who has suffered" (*Summa theologiae* III, q. 75, a. 1, corp.).

It is indeed a striking reality of the Mass and of the Eucharist that we are in the Presence of the One who suffered personally for us. The Passion as a historical event took place within a limited passage of time that can be counted in hours, but nonetheless, in a certain sense, is a continuing reality that has left a permanent mark upon the humanity of Our Lord. In heaven, even in his glorified state, he remains the Victim of love which he became at Calvary. His incarnate being is perpetually identified with the sacrificial love he poured out at Calvary. For he continues to offer this same sacrifice to the Father in the Eucharist. A love that has suffered, that has been wounded by transgressions, is the reality of Christ's humanity in heaven. This is the truth we encounter in the Presence of the Eucharist when we face him in love. It is not without significance that Our Lord showed himself with his wounds after the Resurrection. It is a Eucharistic truth as well that he comes to us with his sacrificial wounds. He gives himself to us as One wounded by love for us. In a statement to St. Faustina, Jesus said: "You are engraved as a deep wound in my heart" (Diary of St. Faustina, 1485). The sacrificial reality of the Eucharist hides its deeper meaning in this awareness of Jesus Christ offering his wounded love for us. When the medieval mystic St. Angela of Foligno asked Our Lord how she could please him more, he showed himself to her in his Passion and told her to "look at my wounds." Our love for Our Lord deepens always with the return of our gaze upon his wounds of love. This repeated effort can become a steady aspiration in our approach to the Mass and the Eucharist.

Finally, in considering the reception of the Holy Eucharist, we can

pursue further insights from these previous reflections. If we recall the reply that St. Thomas Aquinas gave to Our Lord when asked what reward he would like—only you, Lord, nothing else—we have in these words a clear expression of what we ought to seek in the gift of the Eucharist. We might remember first that the Sacrament of Love is not meant simply for our comfort or consolation. The Real Presence we are receiving is the Lord who suffered for us, who remains always the One who offers himself as a Victim of love. The Mass itself is a profound action whereby our divine Lord draws souls, and indeed the entire Church, into a union with his own sacrificial love. Just as he lifts up bread and wine into himself as he now is in heaven, so, too, he wants to lift up our own offering of ourselves to a oneness with his being. When we speak of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, it is primarily a Eucharistic truth. The Church becomes the Body of Christ by offering the Eucharist and consuming Christ. He in turn receives us into himself when we receive him in a loving surrender of ourselves. To the degree we are taken into him, we become one with his own sacrificial love. In effect, the reception of Holy Communion is to receive the Passion of Christ into our lives. If we grow in love and faith, we will recognize more clearly that the sacrificial disposition of Christ's love animates our lives more strongly and, indeed, transforms all suffering in our lives. A readiness to give ourselves to a sacrificial offering for others is a fitting consequence of the reception of the Eucharist when love is clearly present in our soul. We are drawn to enter into Our Lord's own self-offering and ready to lay down our lives for others. A perennial truth of the Church is that it flourishes in holiness to the degree that souls in all walks of life are fervent in sacrificial self-giving, offering their sufferings for other souls. The strength for this spirit of self-offering comes from the Eucharist.

Love ought to be the last word in any attempt to ponder the Sacrament of Love. A rhythm of receiving from God the gift of himself, succeeded by a flowing out in our own sacrificial self-giving, is a pattern in every life inflamed by love for the Eucharist. We might propose an example from the life of a contemporary saint. It is not surprising that St. Teresa of Calcutta would have a great love for the Eucharist that matched the dedicated outpouring of herself to the poor. She grasped the essential truth of the Eucharist in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ as Priest and Victim, and then found his Real Presence each day hiding in the disguise of misery and hardship in the poor. One day a consecrated Host at a Mass in the Motherhouse of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta had accidentally fallen from the ciborium to the floor between the altar and the tabernacle. The priest had not noticed this. After being informed about the Host by a

novice cleaning the chapel after Mass, Mother Teresa went to the chapel, approached the Eucharist on the floor, prostrated herself, and then knelt for some time in prayer before the Presence of her Lord and God lying on the floor, before placing the Host back in the tabernacle. What was in her prayer in those minutes? Perhaps the same words as St. Thomas—only you, Lord, nothing else? Or she might have pondered the thought of the presence of Jesus Christ in the poor people on the floors of misery throughout this world. The Eucharist cannot but lead us, if we love much, to realize that Jesus continues to show us his Passion until the end of time. Let us be ready, if we love him in the Eucharist, to allow him to show his Passion in our own personal lives.

Eras in the Church differ, but each is defined in a certain sense by its relationship with the Mass and its love for the Eucharist. We live in a time of extreme contradiction and contrariety in this regard. It is a time of the most widespread prevalence of sacrilege in the Church's history. This has coincided with sickening scandals in the priesthood and a diminished reverence toward the Eucharist to a degree that has no comparison in recent centuries. Yet at the same time the inflamed fervor of many souls in love with the Eucharist is quite pronounced. The Eucharist remains at the center of countless Catholic lives, in many hidden lives, both within religious congregations, among priests, and in the laity. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is a daily fixture in many of these lives. If we wonder what captures such souls, the answer is that the Real Presence of Our Lord takes hold of hearts that love him. Transubstantiation is not an abstruse doctrine in such lives, but a burning reality of truth. They are drawn to make their own the sacrificial offering of love which they encounter each day in the Mass, receiving the One who suffered for a world in desperate need of his Presence more than ever. They have found the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and nothing is more desirable in their lives. Jesus Christ has given himself to them, and they have learned to offer themselves in return.