

Tract 8: A Eucharistic Form of Life

In his path-breaking *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman famously distinguished between “notional apprehension” and “real apprehension,” clarifying further that “theology properly and directly deals with notional apprehension; religion with imaginative.”¹ It is important to note two features of Newman’s reflection. First, it is not a question of either/or, but, decidedly, of both/and. Both intellect and imagination, mind and heart, reason and affection, must be engaged. Theology and religion are intimately, indeed indispensably, related.

Secondly, as the above quote indicates, “real” apprehension” may also be designated “imaginative.” For Newman, the passage from the merely notional to the real is mediated by the imagination, by evocative images which captivate the heart. Hence the aesthetic has a crucial role to play in the cultivation of a robust spiritual life.

Thus, later in the *Grammar of Assent* Newman makes appeal to the Church’s liturgical life as the fruit of real and not merely notional apprehension. It is “the imagination and the heart” that, creating hymns like *Veni Creator* and *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, convert notional propositions about the divinity of the Holy Spirit into objects of real apprehension and assent.²

We are all familiar with the transforming effect on the young Francis of the image of the crucified in the church of San Damiano. And Teresa

¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 82.

² Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 94. See the remark by Paul Murray, O.P., on Aquinas’s “Sequence” for the Feast of Corpus Christi: “In a work like *Lauda Sion* what offers sanction for belief is not simply the repetition of doctrinal statements, but the sharp and bright manner in which these statements are made, the sheer memorability of the lines” (*Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry* [London: Bloomsbury, 2013], 231).

of Avila, after years of rather routine and rote religious life, experienced a renewed conversion through her encounter with a convent crucifix.

I dare say each of us can identify “images” (whether pictorial, sculptural, or musical) that have played a prominent part in the awakening and sustaining of our spiritual vision and commitment. Such vital, life-engendering images form an essential part of the religious life of every committed Christian.

But I think it important also to discern less wholesome images: images that are spiritually damaging, destructive, even demonic. There is the internet-fueled scourge of pornographic images which both demean and addict. The image of the Swastika unleashed legions of hatred in the past and still continues to enthrall some today. The human *imago Dei* has too often been perverted into *imago diaboli*, and images play a preponderant role in that degradation.

In this reflection I would like to offer a concrete instance of such a “negative” image that impacted me in a particularly profound way. As so often, mere happenstance led to the place and situation in question. But what was experienced there I count providential.

The place was the relatively small town of Litomerice in the Czech Republic, about forty miles northwest of Prague. A friend and I decided to drive out of Prague to savor something of the Czech countryside. As I recall, it was a sunny spring day, ideal for an excursion. Arriving at the town, we had lunch and then set out to explore. We soon came upon a Baroque church, in the Jesuit style, that we entered. However, instead of a quiet place of prayer, we found a scene of wanton destruction. We later learned that the church had been converted into a warehouse during the Communist regime and left slowly to decay – part of the roof missing.

But the dominant image (awful, yet revelatory) was the sight of eight side altars lining the central nave. From each of them the tabernacle had been gouged out, leaving mere emptiness, a gaping void. One sensed a truly malevolent action, opening upon a threatening abyss. Real presence had been defiantly rejected. Absence prevailed.

The apocalyptic scene was heightened by an exhibition that had been mounted in the desecrated church. It depicted emaciated figures who had been imprisoned by the Nazis in the forced labor camp near the town (whose German name was Leitmeritz when it formed part of the Sudetenland.) There were also letters and objects left by inmates of the nearby concentration camp of Theresienstadt. Recollections of those tortured under the Communist regime added to the desolation. The overwhelming sensation was that of a demonic inhumanity. The defacing of the altars was replicated

in the defacing of the tortured and murdered human beings. As though the demonic intent was to obliterate all traces of the Face of Christ.

What struck me, then, as revelatory was the nexus between the repudiation of presence represented by the violated tabernacles and the parallel violation of humanity. Of course, absence also assumes guises less stark, yet also deadening and deadly: loss of meaning and hope, resentment breeding hatred, desperation that turns destructive of self and others. I realized (in Newman's strong sense of the term) that one can fully appreciate and celebrate real presence only if one seriously comes to grips with its contradiction: real absence. The culture of death is fueled by a denial of presence, not only in its extraordinary manifestation in Litomerice, but in its all too ordinary appearances in our culture and our daily lives.

If this Dantean intuition resonates, then it suggests that the vocation of Christians, and especially Catholics, is to be stewards and witnesses of real presence in their lives and activities. To be so, they must be firmly rooted in faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, as Benedict XVI affirmed in his rich apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*: "Every great reform [in the Church] has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in the Lord's Eucharistic presence among his people."³

A crucial dimension of that "rediscovery" must be the firm conviction of the unique agency of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration. He is the one Priest as he is the one Savior. Indeed, salvation is the priestly work of Jesus himself, enacted once for all, and made present ever anew in the Eucharistic sacrifice. At a time when there is the persistent peril of "horizontalism" in our liturgical gatherings, the inversion of the community upon itself, Benedict's insistence is imperative.

The Eucharist is Christ who gives himself to us and continually builds us up as his body. Hence, in the striking interplay between the Eucharist which builds up the Church, and the Church herself which "makes" the Eucharist, the primary causality is expressed in the first formula: the Church is able to celebrate and adore the mystery of Christ present in the Eucharist precisely because Christ first gave himself to her in the sacrifice of the Cross. The Church's ability to 'make' the Eucharist is completely rooted in Christ's self-gift to her.⁴

³ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission (2007), §6.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §14.

This agency of Christ, his ongoing self-gift, is, paradoxically, made possible because of his Ascension to the Father's Glory. The manifestations of this ongoing and multiform "giving" are manifold, as the Book of Revelation witnesses in the letters to the churches. The risen, ascended Lord stands at the door of the churches and knocks (Rev 3:20), bringing both judgment and healing. He does not exercise an absent Lordship, but present and active agency. And his presence and agency receive their fullest expression in the Eucharist. As Paul Griffiths rightly remarks: "The principal condition of the possibility of the Eucharist is exactly that Jesus has ascended. . . . After the Ascension, his flesh, veiled as bread, and his blood veiled as wine, can be touched and tasted everywhere and at once, without constraint by the metronome of time or the map grid of space."⁵

But this real presence of the risen, ascended Lord does not preclude the participatory presence of those gathered to celebrate; rather, it calls forth, enables, and indeed requires it. The "full conscious, and active participation" of the congregation, desired and promoted by the Second Vatican Council,⁶ is most fundamentally our participation in the Paschal Mystery, the death, resurrection *and* ascension of Jesus Christ. By this participation in the Eucharist we truly become the body of Christ, living members of the living Head.

Indeed, Benedict XVI recalls that "Christian antiquity used the same words, *Corpus Christi*, to designate Christ's body born of the Virgin Mary, his Eucharistic body, and his ecclesial body. This clear datum of the tradition helps us to appreciate the inseparability of Christ and the Church."⁷ In this regard the Australian theologian, Anthony Kelly perceptively comments: "The different aspects or realizations of Christ's body are so interwoven, that one has a sense of a corporeal field of incarnational communication rather than of separable entities."⁸

The *novum* of the Paschal Mystery inaugurates a new transformed order of relations constitutive of a new self. What Pascal calls the new *ordo caritatis* might fittingly be called the *ordo Eucharistiae*. For, Christians are nourished and schooled in the Eucharist to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14), who is our "hope of Glory" (Col 1:27). Indeed, if our participation is "full, conscious, and active," then "we all with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from

⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Christian Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 51.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, §14.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §15.

⁸ Anthony J. Kelly, *Upward: Faith, Church, and the Ascension of Christ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 87.

one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Thus, Saint Paul exclaims with wonderment that “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). In full harmony with this Pauline vision, Benedict XVI, drawing upon his beloved Saint Augustine, insists that, in the Eucharist, “Christ assimilates us to himself.” Consequently, “not only have we become Christians, we have become Christ himself.”⁹

This “Christification,” this incorporation into the body of Christ, is, of course, *in via*. As Gregory of Nyssa loved to insist, Christian life is both *telos* and *arche*: an ending which is ever a new beginning. In this vein, Kelly rightly comments: “Christ’s ascension does not mean disembodiment”; rather it is we who “are not yet fully embodied in him, as we are destined to be.”¹⁰ We are not yet “fully embodied in him,” fully transformed into our new selfhood as member of Christ’s body. To put it another way: *Jesus Christ is truly present in the Eucharist; it is we who are not fully present to him, to ourselves, and to others*. To the extent that we ourselves are deficient in our presence, we cannot hope to be advocates and witnesses of real presence to the world.

Hence the need to engage in practices of presence, practices that realize and enhance what *Sacramentum Caritatis* calls the new “Eucharistic form of life.”¹¹ It is the life to which we are summoned each time the celebrant admonishes at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God!” and we consent by responding, “It is right and just!” Let us briefly consider, then, some practices by which we become more fully present to God, self, and others. Those I would underscore are attention, respect, reverence, adoration, and, permeating all, gratitude.

These practices need to be even more intentional in a secular culture that provides little external support to Christian faith. We need them to sharpen our “spiritual senses” in a culture where even our physical senses so often atrophy, dulled by sensory overload.

We might use the venerable image of a “spiritual ladder” to sketch briefly these indispensable practices.

The bottom rung of the ladder is *attention*. In a technological and media culture of countless distractions we need to cultivate the discipline of paying attention, of being alert to the present moment with its challenges and possibilities. Without concentrated attention, presence is lessened and absence prevails. Indeed, attention is the prerequisite for dialogue. It fosters

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §36.

¹⁰ Kelly, *Upward*, 95.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §§70–83.

the careful listening in whose absence conversation soon deteriorates into competing monologues.

A second rung of the ladder is *respect*. The word itself is suggestive. Its root meaning – *re-spicere* – is to look attentively. Not a quick passing glance, much less a looking down upon, a *de-spicere*, but a careful regard. Not the all-too-depreciating snapshot of some masterpiece of art as one dashes through a museum—pausing briefly for a selfie with the work of art dimly in the background: Mona Lisa and me!

Respect embraces care for the natural environment and even for material things. Saint Benedict in his *Rule* mandates a regard “for all the goods and utensils of the monastery as if they were sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected.”¹²

By contrast, much of our “throw away” culture, so often decried by Pope Francis, not only quickly discards things deemed “out of fashion,” but flippantly promotes actual abuse of the creation entrusted by God to human care.

A third rung is *reverence*. A recognition of the inviolable dignity of persons and the sense of a holy presence emanating from faces often weary and burdened. Such reverence is crucially needed in a late-capitalist society that too often spurns the poor, the elderly, the unborn. Once again the *Rule of Saint Benedict* offers salutary, if radical, counsel: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ”; indeed, “by a bow of the head or a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is welcomed in them.”¹³

But reverence for persons also requires that others never be treated as things to satisfy one’s desires, whether economic or sexual. In a Catholic Eucharistic form of life, social and sexual ethics form a “seamless garment.”¹⁴ Indeed, there is a much closer relation between them than is often admitted: both must address issues of power. And both are subjected to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, of whose body Christians are members. The Apostle Paul provides the ultimate foundation for the Christian practice of reverence: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20).

¹² *Rule of Benedict*, ch. 31, nos. 10–11 (*The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1981]).

¹³ *Rule of Benedict*, ch. 53, nos. 1, 7.

¹⁴ Note the sections in *Sacramentum Caritatis* devoted to “the social implications of the Eucharistic mystery” (§89) and “the sanctification of the world and the protection of creation” (§92).

Attention, respect, and reverence as “practices of presence” yield a twofold fruit. They heighten the presence of the subject, enriching his or her sense of self. But they also permit the presence of the other to stand forth, disclosing their inherent mystery. Thus, in both subject and object, the ground is laid for what we yearn for at our truest and deepest: communion.

A final practice that is assuming greater importance, especially among young people, is that of *Eucharistic adoration*. Like the young Gerard Manley Hopkins, they turn “with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.”¹⁵ In adoration, Christ unveils the mystery of his presence and our own. To be present, in that reverential attention which is contemplation, to the presence of him who loves us and gives himself for us fosters our passage from the notional to the real in our relationship with Jesus who is Lord, Savior, and friend.

To eyes being transformed in faith, all intimations of presence find in the Eucharist their recapitulation and fulfillment. Here their true dignity and destiny stand revealed: they bear the form and face of Jesus Christ.

Thus the Eucharist becomes a school in which we develop our spiritual senses, learning to be attentive, respectful, and reverential and to carry these attitudes into our daily lives and our everyday relations with others. Indeed, a Eucharistic form of life transcends the separation of “contemplation” and “action” by forming believers into “contemplatives in action” whose lives are founded upon and guided by the Apostle’s injunction: “And be thankful [*eucharistoi ginesthe*], . . . Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks [*eucharistountes*] to God the Father through him” (Col 3:15, 17).

Becoming ever more fully conformed to the Eucharistic Christ, we allow his real presence to permeate our world. N.V.

¹⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” stanza 3. Hopkins’s poetry has helped so many to pass from a notional to the real apprehension that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” and that “Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his.”