When I Am Lifted Up, I Will Draw All Men to Myself: Eucharistic Sacrifice and Eucharistic Adoration

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I

The London *Assize of Nuisance*[1] for the year 1370 records a case brought against a certain Walter Doget by the parish priest of St. Leonard's, Eastcheap, for having damaged the wall of the church adjacent to his house to create an opening through which he could view the celebration of Mass.[2]

In her book, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Miri Rubin offered this and other examples of the compelling desire to behold, to gaze upon, to contemplate, the consecrated chalice and host during, *and* outside of, the Mass. Tracing the absorbing historical development of Eucharistic ritual and devotion, Rubin notes that, in the late twelfth century, "a gesture of elevation came to mark the moment of consecration, and to offer its meaning to the congregation, . . . the specific showing of Christ's body."[3] For a variety of reasons that need not be rehearsed here, the insertion of this gesture, while not uncontested, prevailed in the ritual of the Mass. The elevation was meant to draw attention to the consecration, a moment of such significance that it was eventually marked by the ringing of a special bell. As the ritual of elevation

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1 An assize was a court for common-law disputes, and an assize of nuisance was a common-law writ for abatement and recovery of damages for a nuisance, and thus the *Assize of Nuisance* here refers, as can likely be guessed, to the record of such writs brought in such a court.

2 Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 290.

3 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 55.

was solidified in practice and in meaning, it came to be seen as possessing almost a "sacramental efficacy" of its own—a kind of alternative "'sacramental viewing,' which like communion was taught to affect one markedly."[4] So attractive was this idea of the singular importance of the elevation that it became necessary for Church authorities to insist that it could not be regarded a substitute for receiving communion. "It was stressed that gazing was not sufficient, and that communion was not merely a duty but a real need"—a real nourishment which mere gazing could never replace.[5]

By the fourteenth century, because of "the teaching on the virtue of seeing the eucharist, and the development of routines for exposition," there emerged "a notion of the *right* to see the eucharist and attempts to enforce this right."[6] During the interdict of 1376 when public masses were suspended in Florence, people demanded that there be provision for exposition of the Eucharist. A chronicler "described scenes of people trying to gain a glimpse of the host in open chapels and through holes in church walls." It appeared that "the issue of access to the host was more pressing than that of communion which in any case was experienced far less frequently."[7]

"Naturally," writes Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, "concerning a practice that was virtually not present in the Church's first thousand years, we will want to ask how it came about."[8] But not in this paper.

Rather than rehearse in detail the history of these developments in liturgy, theology, and devotion, let us consider them as, in a deeply religious sense, providential—as unlocking an inherent potential for faith, prayer, and spirituality focused on the Holy Eucharist. In other words, this paper seeks to sketch the lines of a mystagogical elucidation of the astonishing rightness and fittingness of these developments as it now seems to us in hindsight. The forms of Eucharistic worship that emerged gradually only in the second millennium of Catholic history have the capacity to enhance the spiritually formative character of our participation in the liturgy.[9] The

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4 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 63.

5 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 148.

6 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 289.

7 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 290.

8 Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., *Theology at the Eucharistic Table: Master Themes in the Theological Tradition* (Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo; Leominster: Gracewing, 2003), 238.

9 I have commented previously: "Since the liturgy is in itself formative of the Christian life, it may seem odd to speak about liturgical formation as some kind of training apart from the liturgy as such. But the Second Vatican Council insists on the need for liturgical formation precisely to enhance the spiritually formative character of the liturgy. Just

sacramental grace that comes to us at Mass in the consuming of the Body and Blood of Christ bears spiritual fruit in acts of faith and charity in our daily existence, and notably in the desire to maintain a contemplative gaze before the mystery of the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Eucharistic devotion outside of Mass is the continuation of what happens through sacramental grace in the Mass.

II

As sometimes happens, a book comes to one's attention just at the right moment. Rubin's book was just what I needed years ago when I was one of several Dominican friars—among them, Father Giles Dimock—who were working to address concerns about the resurgence of devotional exposition and adoration during the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II. Specifically, we were part of a team helping the leaders of the Youth 2000 movement to articulate a justification of the format of their retreats for young people which incorporated long periods of Eucharistic adoration. Among the theological objections which concerned us most, the principal one was that, in Father Benedict Groeschel's succinct formulation, "devotion to the Eucharistic Presence, especially outside of Mass, detracts from the preeminent importance of the Eucharist as both sacrifice and sacrament."[10]

Today, more than forty years into the revival of Eucharistic devotion in the Church, this complaint no longer attracts the urgent attention it once did. We have come to understand the importance of something that Father Dimock said to me at the time: "Exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament are nothing but the *contemplative prolongation* of the elevation of the host and chalice at Mass."[11] This sentiment presses us not merely to defend a practice that seemed (and still seems to some) problematic, but to demonstrate its profound theological and spiritual value as a way of entering into and living in the mystery of Christ's Eucharistic presence.

Consider the four moments during the Eucharistic sacrifice when the

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as 'mystagogy' traditionally referred both to the liturgical action and to the catechesis that explains its meaning, so liturgical formation is meant to enhance our participation in the liturgy itself" (J. A. Di Noia, O.P., "*Quantum Potes, Tantum Aude*: Elements of Liturgical Spirituality in the Theology of St. Thomas," in *Thomas Aquinas as Spiritual Teacher*, ed. Michael A. Dauphinais et al. [Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2023], 306).

10 Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R., and James Monti, *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1996), 141.

11 And wrote subsequently in Giles Dimock, O.P., *101 Questions and Answers on the Eucharist* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 86.

celebrant raises the sacred host and the precious blood of the Lord above the altar and into the view of the congregation. The first moment occurs during the consecration when he elevates first the sacred host, and then the chalice containing the precious blood. The second moment occurs when, at the concluding doxology of the Eucharistic prayer, the priest raises the host and the chalice, saying: "Through Him, and with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever." Then, after the Lord's Prayer and just before the distribution of Holy Communion, the celebrant presents the sacred host and the precious blood to the entire congregation with the words "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world." And finally, in a more personal moment, each communicant is invited by the priest to behold and adore "the Body of Christ" before receiving Holy Communion.

By reason of their several levels of signification, these arresting moments of "elevation" herald the mystagogical meaning of Eucharistic exposition and adoration as a ritual protraction of the Mass itself. The most important of these significations, formulated in biblical, liturgical and sacramental categories, express the mystery of the Incarnation and the fulness of the Paschal Mystery. Christ, the only begotten Son of God who was raised up on the Cross for our sake, who rose from the dead and ascended to the right of the Father, is raised up at Mass so that we may look on him and be saved. In the solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, this "being raised up for our sake" is prolonged and extended. In exposition, adoration, and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, with the eyes of faith, we behold the contemplative extension or prolongation of the Eucharistic sacrifice itself.[12] The Christian faithful who see, adore, and receive Christ in the sacrament of the altar desire to continue, in a more contemplative

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[12] Seeing and gazing upon the sacred species were central to the development of Eucharistic devotion in the Middle Ages. For Aquinas, whom I am following throughout this discussion, there was no need to postulate a special spiritual sense of sight, in addition to our normal visual sense. The ordinary powers of sense perception along with our powers of knowing and loving are enabled by grace, by the infused theological and moral virtues, and by the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, to be engaged with prayerful contemplation of God. It is not *additional* faculties or powers that human persons require to know, to love, and in some way to experience God, but their natural powers *elevated* to a supernatural level of being and activity by grace. For a discussion of this issue, see Richard Cross, "Thomas Aquinas," in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174–89. For a wide-ranging and fascinating discussion of understandings—medieval and otherwise—of the significance of "seeing" the Eucharist, see Ann W. Anstell, *Eating*

and extended manner, to look with love on Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament. From the first words of the *Introit*, through the readings of Sacred Scripture, capped by the solemn tonalities of the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite, the Mass has a powerful upward movement that draws us all who "have been raised with Christ to seek the things that are above" (see Col 3:1–4) and delivers us into a state of eschatological expectation as we hope to dwell at the right hand of the Father where Christ is and where he has made a place for human nature, and thus for us. Our participation in the Mass provides a foretaste of the experience of heaven itself, where we will be able to gaze upon Christ in all his glory and share in it.[13] This experience is recalled and prolonged every time the faithful engage in the prayer of Eucharistic adoration.

When the sacred host is taken from the tabernacle and enshrined in the monstrance in the ritual of exposition, Christ does not become more present to us sacramentally, but *we become more present to him*. In beholding the sacred host exposed to us in the monstrance, our attention is more focused and concentrated. In that sense, we become more present to him. We have all experienced this upon entering a church or chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar: the mood is one of palpable, even intense, silence, reverence, and attention. All eyes are fixed in faith on Christ, sacramentally present on the altar.

This prolonged beholding is the school of contemplation in which we become ever more conformed to the divine mystery. A remarkable passage from a homily on Ecclesiastes by St. Gregory of Nyssa dwells precisely on this point. "We shall be blessed with clear vision," says Gregory, "if we keep our eyes fixed on Christ." The experience of adoration cultivates in the Catholic faithful habits of concentration, intercession, and contemplative prayer. As St. Gregory says: "Saint Paul himself and all who have reached the same heights of sanctity had their eyes fixed on Christ, and so have all who live and move and have their being in him." Focusing on the sacramental presence of Christ during Eucharistic adoration is a concrete

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Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

13 Aquinas's acclaimed Magnificat antiphon for the feast of Corpus Christi, *O Sacrum Convivium*, captures all these past, present, and future aspects of the Holy Eucharist: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ becomes our food, the memory of his passion is celebrated, the soul is filled with grace, and the memory of his passion is celebrated." In the final verse of his *Adoro te*, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's translation, we pray: "Jesus whom I look at shrouded here below, / I beseech thee send me what I thirst for so, / Some day to gaze on Thee face to face in light, / And be blest forever with thy glory's sight."

way of having one's whole existence directed to Christ and transformed by Christ in that moment. "The man who keeps his eyes upon the head and origin of the universe has them on virtue in all its perfection; he has them on truth, on justice, on immortality and on everything else that is good, for Christ is goodness itself."[14] In short, as St. Albert the Great wrote in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, "by gazing on what is good, we become good."[15]

In beholding him, we also adore him. "Down in adoration falling / Lo, the sacred host we hail," in the words of the English translation of the *Pange lingua*.[16] The most natural, instinctive response to seeing the Blessed Sacrament exposed is to fall to our knees. In his homily at Marienfeld at the conclusion of World Youth Day in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI provided a profound reflection on the meaning of the word "adore" when he pointed out that it signifies both submission to God and the communion of love—in effect, a submission that becomes love.[17] Love leads to communion, both in the sense of our ever-deepening interior union with Christ, but also in the sense of receiving him in Holy Communion as our nourishment. Beholding, adoring, and receiving flow into one another in the Mass. In his commentary on Psalm 98, St. Augustine wrote: "No one receives the flesh who, beholding him, has not first adored him."[18] These remarkable words show that participation in the sacrifice of the Mass leads to Eucharistic adoration, which itself leads us back to the Eucharistic sacrifice. First beholding and adoring during the Mass, we then literally receive Christ as food in Holy Communion. During Eucharistic adoration, our beholding and adoring engender an interior reception of Christ while they

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[14] St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homily 5 on Ecclesiastes, in Liturgy of the Hours, office of Readings for Monday of the Seventh Week of the Year (*Patrologia Graeca* 44:683–86).

[15] See Albert the Great, *In* IV *sent*., d. 19, a. 19, sc 1: "Saepe vidimus quod *ostensio boni provocat ad bonum*; ergo videtur, quod non debeant prohiberi videres peccatores." Albert's remark features in his affirmative reply to the question whether those in the state of mortal sin should be allowed to look at the Body of Christ sacramentally present in the Eucharist.

[16] For discussions of the hymn *Pange lingua*, see Paul Murray, O.P., *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 191–202; and Jan-Heiner Tück, *A Gift of Presence: The Theology and Poetry of the Eucharist in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 175–93.

[17] Benedict XVI, Address during the Apostolic Journey to Cologne for XX World Youth Day, August 20, 2005.

[18] St. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 98.9 (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 39:1385), quoted by Andrew Hofer, O.P., *The Power of Patristic Preaching: The Word in Our Flesh* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 203.

prepare us for a deepened participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice and the reception of Holy Communion.

Beholding, adoring, receiving lead us to communion. At its depth, this communion is nothing less than the communion we enjoy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The triune God desires to share the communion of Trinitarian life with us, with creaturely persons. No one has ever desired anything more than the triune God desires this, and nothing makes sense apart from this. God himself has revealed to us (for how could we otherwise have known about it?) that it is this divine desire—more properly, intention and plan—that lies at the basis of everything: creation, the Incarnation, redemption, sanctification, and glory. The entire economy of salvation is directed to this sharing of Trinitarian communion with us.

Contemplative prayer before the Blessed Sacrament teaches us to see everything in the light of this divine desire to share the communion of Trinitarian life with us. Looking at things this way—looking at them the way that Christ himself has taught us to do—we understand why we were created, why the Word became flesh, why Christ died and rose from the dead, how the Holy Spirit makes us holy, and why we will see God face to face. We were created so that God could share his life with us. God sent his only begotten Son to save us from the sins that would have made it impossible for us to share in this life. Christ died for this, and rising from the dead, gave us new life. To become holy is to be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, into the image of the Son so that we may be adopted as sons and daughters of the Father. Glory is the consummation of our participation in the communion of the triune God—nothing less than seeing God face to face.

The experience of adoration also teaches us something very important about the mystery of the Eucharist itself. Why did Christ make himself present to us in this way? Why did he make it so easy for us to behold, adore, and receive him? How can this be possible?

According to St. John's Gospel, the first people to hear Christ proclaim the Eucharist asked exactly that question. Some embraced our Lord's words in faith, but others were put off by it. When they heard Christ say, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh," they asked, incredulously, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:51–52). How can this be indeed? —a perfectly natural question from the human point of view, the sort of question frequently voiced when people hear about something that God is said to have done or to be doing. But with the eyes of faith, the vexing "how can this be?"

becomes an awestruck "why not?" We have seen that God desires to share his life with us in the most intimate manner. The Catholic tradition has not hesitated to describe this participation in the divine life as a true friendship with God. Given this truth of our faith, is it not in a sense appropriate that God should be moved to send his only begotten Son into the world and, in the breathtaking divine condescension of the Incarnation, to take up a human existence, and to be known and loved among us as Jesus of Nazareth? Was it not fitting, as the Scriptures say, that the Son of Man should offer his life to his Father on the Cross in a reconciling sacrifice of love for our sake?

For St. Thomas Aquinas, it is but a short step from the Incarnation to the Holy Eucharist. In this connection, he wrote: "It is a law of friendship that friends should live together. . . . Christ has not left us without his bodily presence on our pilgrimage, but he joins us to himself in this sacrament in the reality of his body and blood."[19] In effect, Aquinas is saying that it makes sense, given what we know about God's plan to bring us into the intimacy of his divine life, to leave us the extraordinary gift of the real and sacramental presence of his Son in the Eucharist. In the light of the entire mystery of faith, we can see the Eucharist as the gesture of our divine friend. Pope John Paul II wrote: "It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple and to feel the infinite love present in his heart."[20]

The experience of beholding, adoring, and receiving the Eucharistic Christ teaches us all this. No wonder that Pope John Paul II could write: "I want once more to recall this truth and to join you, my dear brothers and sisters, in adoration before this mystery: a great mystery, a mystery of mercy. What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes 'to the end,' a love which knows no measure."[21]

III

The mystagogical understanding of the roots of Eucharistic devotion in the Mass that we have been tracing explicitly reflects the sacrificial character of the Eucharistic celebration.[22] The one whose sacramental presence is

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19 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 75, a, 1.

20 Pope St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), §25; cf. John 13:25.

21 John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §11; cf. John 13:1.

22 See the chapter on the Eucharistic sacrifice in Franck Quoëx, *Liturgical Theology in Thomas Aquinas: Sacrifice and Salvation History* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 117–43.

the object of faith's contemplative gaze within the Mass and beyond the Mass is none other than the crucified and risen Christ who sits now at the right hand of the Father. "They shall look upon him whom they had pierced" (Zech 12:10). In the Eucharistic commemoration, the "they" becomes "we": it is *we*, the faithful, who look on the one who was pierced for our sins.

We understand more fully what this beholding entails when we recall Christ's words in the Gospel: just "as Moses raised the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be raised up, for whoever believes in him has eternal life" (John 3:14; cf. Num 21:4b–9). Just as those who looked upon the bronze serpent were saved from death, so too those who look with unshakeable faith upon Jesus Christ lifted up will be saved. Just like the bronze serpent, fixed on a high base, so Christ clearly manifests himself in his Passion on the Cross, on a mountain top, for all the world to see.

We know from Scripture that this lifting up of the Son of Man occurred over the course of three moments. In the first moment, our sinless Savior was lifted up on the Cross, dying like a criminal before the whole world, to accomplish the satisfaction for our sins that, in transforming us, reconciles us to his heavenly Father. In the second moment, our Savior was raised from the dead. He who seemed to have been defeated by sin and death is now alive, and victorious over these powers. The entire Paschal Mystery culminated in a third moment of being lifted up. On the day of the Ascension, he goes to the Father to prepare for us a place at the Father's right hand.

Christ, who was raised on the Cross for us, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father, is raised sacramentally at every Holy Mass so that we may look upon him and be saved. And, afterward, in the solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament through which this "being lifted up for us" is prolonged in the exposition, adoration, and benediction, we have the contemplative extension or prolongation of the raising of Christ that is celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Christian faithful who contemplate, adore, and receive Christ in the sacrament of the altar desire to continue, in a more contemplative and prolonged way, to look with love upon Christ raised up for us on Golgotha and sacramentally in the Mass.

When he instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, "Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and blood; he also expressed its sacrificial meaning and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all."[23] By overcoming the effects of sin, the sacrificial Passion and

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[23] John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §12.

death of Christ and his glorious resurrection and ascension—the Paschal Mystery—restored our friendship with God.

In addition, Pope John Paul made a striking point: "This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father *only after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there."[24] Not only does our Incarnate divine friend want to stay with us; he wants to do so precisely in virtue of the power of the Paschal Mystery which guarantees what must now, always and everywhere, be a reconciled friendship won at the price of his blood.

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The bond of communion established by the grace that is given in the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ sacramentally present in the Eucharist can be deepened through acts of Eucharistic adoration. Many years ago, my theological imagination was captured by Miri Rubin's account of the compelling desire on the part of medieval Christians just to see the elevated host at Mass. This paper argues that the practices of Eucharistic devotion which emerged in the medieval period have proven, in Catholic experience, to be apt instruments for prolonging the gestures of adoration and love enacted through sacramental grace in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

This paper has sketched a mystagogical analysis of the links between Eucharistic devotion and the Eucharistic sacrifice. By "a mystagogical analysis" is meant a form of explanation that is at once biblical, liturgical, theological, and spiritual. Each of these aspects deserves more research and reflection. This paper will have served its purpose if other scholars of the Eucharist are inspired to pursue some of the lines of research traced here.

As to Walter Doget, with whom we began, readers will be pleased to learn that the complaint against him at the London assize court in 1370 was resolved in his favor. The court found that, having donated a portion of his property for the church to be built, "he should be allowed to enjoy the view."[25] N·V

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[24] John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §1.

[25] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 290.