

Introduction

The Eucharist is one of the great mysteries of our Catholic Faith. Down through the centuries it has been a constant source of spiritual nourishment for generations of Catholics and has filled their hearts with the joy of knowing that, in their Communion, they have received the very Body and Blood of Christ.

In his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, Bl. John Paul II reflected on the unfathomable dimensions of this great truth:

The Church lives by the Eucharist, by the fullness of this Sacrament, the stupendous content and meaning of which have often been expressed in the Church's Magisterium from the most distant times down to our own days. However, we can say with certainty that, although this teaching is sustained by the acuteness of theologians, by men of deep faith and prayer, and by ascetics and mystics, in complete fidelity to the Eucharistic mystery, it still reaches no more than the threshold, since it is incapable of grasping and translating into words what

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the Eucharist is in all its fullness, what is expressed by it and what is actuated by it. Indeed the Eucharist is the ineffable Sacrament!¹

John Paul II is telling us that there is still much to learn about the Eucharist, that our knowledge “still reaches no more than the threshold”; yet we can say that the Church, in her living tradition, treasures a great deal of eucharistic wisdom and has a well-developed eucharistic liturgy.

As John Paul II prepared for the Jubilee Year, he wrote in the Bull of Indiction convoking this event for the year 2000:

For two thousand years, the Eucharist has been the cradle in which Mary has placed Jesus, entrusting him to the adoration and contemplation of all peoples, that, through the humility of the Spouse of Christ, the glory and the power of the Eucharist may gleam all the more—that Eucharist that the Church celebrates and preserves at its heart. Under the sign of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ Jesus, risen and glorified, the light of nations (Lk 2:32), reveals the continuation of his Incarnation. He is still risen and alive in our midst, to nourish believers with his Body and Blood.²

Love reaches its ideal in the eucharistic sacrament. It is a unity that assimilates us more and more to Christ, and through total identification with the suffering Christ, it leads to real holiness. As well as identifying us with Christ, Holy Communion

¹ Bl. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* (March 25, 1979), no. 20.

² Bl. John Paul II, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (November 29, 1998), no. 11.

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is food and “does for the spiritual life all that material food and drink do for the bodily life, namely to sustain, increase, restore, and delight.”³

I have not tried in these pages to write a textbook on the Eucharist or to cover every aspect of it. My primary objective is to provide a book that will help people grow in love for the Mass and for the Blessed Sacrament. To deepen Eucharistic devotion, however, requires a solid theological basis. Hence the first five chapters cover the basic doctrinal aspects of this mystery. The next two chapters focus on devotion to the Blessed Eucharist, during Mass and outside of it.

Blessed John Paul II made an outstanding contribution to eucharistic theology during his long pontificate. In chapter 8, I have summarized the main points of this contribution, basing my study mainly on John Paul II’s principal documents on the Eucharist. In chapter 9, I have reviewed the Eucharist in the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, who made a significant contribution to the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist.

Chapter 10 is a study of the main liturgical elements involved in the celebration of the Mass. Finally, chapter 11 is an examination of the commitment to the Mass in Ireland during times of severe religious persecution. It has much to say about the nature of this sacrifice and about Christian loyalty to it.

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Fr. Thomas J. McGovern

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 79, art. 1; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), nos. 1391–1401.