

The Most Holy Eucharist Series

Prayer Before the Blessed Sacrament

Part One

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My present purpose is to look as closely as we can at one practice of Catholic piety that represents a real development of doctrine in the history of the Church, namely the practice of praying before the Blessed Sacrament, either exposed on the altar or reserved in the tabernacle. Every believing Catholic should make it a practice to pray as much as he can before the Blessed Sacrament on the altar. Why should prayer before the Blessed Sacrament be specially pleasing to God, fruitful for those who pray in this way, and for those whom they pray for? Why prefer when possible this kind of prayer? I would summarize the answer in a series of five terms, with a brief commentary on each as we go along.

Part One (*found in this pamphlet*)

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- 3. The Humanity of Christ as a Channel of Grace**

Part Two (*see subsequent pamphlet*)

- 4. Christ as Food for the Mind and Will**
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1. FAITH IN THE INCARNATION

The most fundamental reason why prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is so meritorious is because it is prayer arising from faith in the cardinal mystery of Christianity, which is faith in the Incarnation. In the famous sixth chapter of John's Gospel wherein the Savior predicted the Eucharist, the whole first part of that chapter is on faith in Him as the Incarnate Son of God. Let us count the passages: first, "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never be hungry. He who believes in me will never thirst." Again, "Yes, it is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and that I shall raise him up on the last day." And again, "I tell you most solemnly, everybody who believes has eternal life." When, therefore, we pray before the Eucharist, whether we advert to it or not, whether we even think of it or not, we are professing in the depths of our souls our faith in Jesus Christ as the natural, only-begotten Son of the Father.

The same apostle, John, in his first letter comes back to the same theme, only this time in the strongest words ever spoken by man on what is the foundation stone of the Christian religion. Says John, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten by God." Then the promise written under divine inspiration, "Who can overcome the world? Only the man who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." Everyone else will be overcome by the world.

So the first reason why prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is so important is because it is an expression of faith in the divinity of Christ, that is, in the Son of Mary who is the Son of God, who is here, right here and now before me, as close and perhaps closer than were the people on the hillside near the Sea of Galilee when Jesus first predicted the Holy Eucharist.

2. FAITH IN THE REAL PRESENCE

Another reason why prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is so praiseworthy is because it is a profession of faith in the real bodily presence of Jesus under the sacramental veils. On the same occasion when the Savior foretold the Eucharist He so intertwined two objects of faith as to make them almost inseparable. Let me change it - so closely did He intertwine them that for all time they remain inseparable: faith in His divinity and faith in His Eucharistic humanity, otherwise known as the Real Presence. Recall what happened after hearing what He said. Many of His followers said to themselves, "This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it:?" After this we are further told "many" – note - "many of his disciples," not merely the onlookers or the crowd, but "many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him." Everyone who prays before the Blessed Sacrament is in effect choosing to not only go along with Christ, but physically comes to Christ. Why? Because he believes. Believes what? Believes that behind the external appearances of bread is a Man and behind the Man is God. He or she believes that the Christ who is in the church or chapel is the same who was conceived at Nazareth, who was born at Bethlehem, who fled into Egypt, who lived for thirty years in the same town in which He was conceived, who preached and worked miracles throughout Palestine, who died on the cross on Calvary, rose from the dead and ascended to His Father at Jerusalem. The same Jesus who was there in a definite geographic locality is now here also in a definite geographic place in whatever city or town where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. This is the Christ of history and the Christ - how I like to say it - of geography.

If, as the apostle tells us, without faith no one can please God, so without faith no one can hope to obtain anything from God. On both counts the believer who prays before the Eucharist is a believer indeed. He believes that Jesus Christ is the man from Nazareth, but that this man is the eternal God. He further believes that this same Jesus who is God made man is present as man on earth today: that He is only feet away from me when I pray before Him; that in the Eucharist He has the same human body and soul, hands and feet, and Sacred Heart as He has now in heaven, as He had during His visible stay in the area we now call the Near East. The pray-er before the Eucharist believes that time is erased by the miracle of the Real Presence and so is distance and space. He believes that what Martha told Mary on the occasion of Christ's visit is being told to him or her: "The Master is here and He wants to see you." Hearing this, we are informed, Mary got up quickly and went to Him. That is what every worshipper before the Eucharist does: gets up quickly from wherever he or she may be and goes to the Master who is here waiting for us.

3. THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST AS A CHANNEL OF GRACE

Once we establish the fact of faith that the same Jesus is in the Eucharist as was on earth in New Testament times, it is not difficult to appreciate the third reason why prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is so efficacious. As we read the pages of the Gospels we are struck by the marvelous power that Christ's humanity had in effecting changes in the persons who came into contact with

Him. For the sake of convenience we limit ourselves to two short episodes from the Gospel according to St. Mark.

First episode: when the disciples with Christ were in the boat at sea and a terrible storm broke out, Jesus, who was asleep, got up and rebuked the wind and said to the seas, "Quiet now, be calm!" And the wind dropped and all was calm again. This was the Creator of the wind and the Maker of the seas commanding His creatures. No wonder they obeyed! But He spoke with human lips and pronounced human words as man.

Second episode: when the woman with the hemorrhage who had been ill for a dozen years came up behind Jesus, she said to herself, "If I can even touch His clothes I shall be well again." She touched His clothes and was instantly healed. Mark makes a significant observation about Jesus: "Immediately," he says, "Christ was aware that power had gone out from Him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched my clothes?'" When the frightened woman admitted what she had done, the Savior praised her, "My daughter, your faith has restored you to health."

All through the Gospels during His public life, the humanity of Christ was the instrument of great power that went out from Him to work signs and wonders such as the world had never seen. These signs and wonders were performed by divine power, of course, but through the humanity of Jesus Christ. Healing lepers and the blind, driving out demons, restoring strength to those who were maimed or paralyzed, even raising the dead back to life - always it was the human nature through which the God-man manifested His power and conferred blessings on a suffering and sinful mankind. What He did then, He wants to continue till the end of time. All grace, all power, all blessing comes from God; but all grace, all power and all blessing comes - we believe, uniquely (this is our faith) - comes uniquely through the humanity of the Son of God. This humanity, as we know, operates in many ways, but it acts nowhere more effectively - and I wish to add, miraculously - than through the human nature that is substantially united to the divinity in the Blessed Sacrament.

As then, so now, the power is there, the potential miracles are there, but no less than during His visible stay on earth - and He is on earth, honest; He really is - the condition was faith. The condition *is* faith. What Christ requires of those in whose favor He wants now, as then, to work the signs and wonders that will draw bodies and souls to Himself, is faith.

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