

The Mystery of Faith

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The Mystery of Faith

Meditations on the Eucharist



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The Mystery of Faith: Meditations on the Eucharist

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FOREWORD BY
STANISŁAW CARDINAL DZIWIŚZ
METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOP OF KRAKÓW

Unlike many books on the Eucharist, *The Mystery of Faith* focuses on our personal openness to this sacrament and our disposition to receiving graces flowing from it. The Eucharist operates both by God's action (*ex opera operato*) and through our co-operation (*ex opere operantis*).

Salvation comes through Jesus Christ, yet this salvation needs to be completely made real in each of us. Our Lord Jesus becomes truly present on the altar so as to enable His saving grace to achieve union with us. The valid and fruitful sacrament of Eucharist is the work of Christ himself but connected with responses from individual Christians. Without our faithful cooperation

and collaboration with grace, Holy Communion will not be fruitful.

Usually books on the Eucharist speak of the action of Jesus by power of the Holy Spirit and His words (*ex opere operato*). By the power of these words—not the faith of priest or people—God really becomes present on the altar. Yet the fruits of His redeeming presence depend on the disposition both in holding and receiving the Eucharist (*ex opere operantis*). Graces which flow from the Real Presence do not spiritually force their way into us. “Behold, I stand and knock”—says God (cf. Rev. 3:20). He is never an uninvited guest.

What then are we to do so that the door is open for His coming under the appearances of bread and wine? What obstacles do we have to remove? This is exactly what *The Mystery of Faith* deals with in an unusually deep and simultaneously simple manner. The book shows how to open oneself to the presence of God alive both on the altar and in the tabernacle and how not to impede grace.

To become filled we need to be empty; to be fed we need to be hungry.

The Mystery of Faith invites us to see if there is actually a hunger for God in us, a hunger for Eucharist. It inspires

us to attempt deeper contact with this sacrament in faith and love. After all, Christ always unfailingly wishes to pour His love into us. It is so easy to be closed to it. Then we not only do not receive the grace but, what is worse, it may happen that—as St. Paul says—in receiving the body and the blood of Christ—we are eating and drinking judgment upon ourselves (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29).

The Mystery of Faith opens deeper spaces for contact with the living God. To discover what is so very special about this book we have not only to read it but to pray with it. Its interior richness is amazing. For today's people taken up with worldly pursuits, it can become an unusual spiritual treasure. For those of us for whom contact with the holiest of the sacraments has become routine or stale, it will really make us sit up and think.

"The presence of Jesus in the tabernacle," writes John Paul II, "must be a kind of *magnetic pole* attracting an ever greater number of souls enamored of him, ready to wait patiently to hear his voice and as it were, to sense the beating of his heart."* *The Mystery of Faith* helps contemporary men and women to relate with increasing faith to the Blessed Sacrament and

* Apostolic Letter, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 18.

eventually to fall in love with God, to hear the beating of the eucharistic heart of Jesus.

Along with the author, my ardent wish is that the reader may find help in this book towards a deeper adoration and love of Him who incomprehensibly, daily, comes to us on the altar and stays with us in the tabernacle.

Metropolitan of Kraków

This **IS MY BODY**

IN THE TEXT YOU WILL FIND THE AUTHOR OFTEN WRITES IN THE FIRST PERSON. HE DOES THIS TO COMMUNICATE MOST EFFECTIVELY, NOT TO REVEAL HIS OWN INNER LIFE.

INTRODUCTION

The Church speaks of the universal call to holiness,¹ and this call means the challenge to each and every one of us towards having an interior life. Sacramental and interior life are deeply interdependent. On the one hand, sacramental life offers us objective contact with the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the other, to achieve sanctity it is not enough to be present at Mass and receive His eucharistic body. We need to embrace this interiorly with faith and the humility that is the basis of the three theological virtues.²

The Eucharist is still the undiscovered land, the unknown world. Wanting to live the Eucharist, we need to hear the voice of grace that encourages: Set your foot on the undiscovered land, take the first, second,

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2013f.

² The theological virtues are faith, hope, and love.

and third step and He will lead you on. He, your God, who by rising from the dead has overcome all obstacles, now wants to introduce you to this stunning truth that is regularly occurring on our altars.

By the act of faith (which is a grace both of invitation and response) I can communicate with God who comes out to meet me in the Eucharist.

Once I have discovered this amazing world of God's personal earthly presence with us, I have the opportunity to become so taken up with it that I will be pulled towards the mystery of His very being. He said he wouldn't leave us orphans. He is true to His word, even more than I ever imagined. I am with Him in a different age with the advantage of receiving so much more.

It is amazing that the Church has received this great gift, that I can become a contemporary of Jesus walking in the land of Palestine. There is no doubt that here on the altar something has changed so that the glorified Jesus is himself present. It is magnificent discovering His love that wants not only to be with me but much more to be inside me at every moment. This hidden redeeming presence remains constantly to communicate itself to me while my mind is illuminated by faith.

PART I

FAITH BOWING HUMBLY

I often enter church in just the same way as walking down the road, getting in and out of my car, moving around the house, being in a shop, or in my workplace. Perhaps when I am inside I don't even realize that I am actually in church. When I move around God's house in this way, it doesn't even occur to me that I am being so worldly. Yet my preparation for the miracle, soon to take place on the altar, should be in my thoughts as soon as I set foot in church.

Sometimes at the beginning of Mass, I am not really thinking of the meaning of the Penitential Rite. I may even be late and not sufficiently appreciative of this outstanding event. Yet I need to remember that in my repentance, God becomes present with His grace insofar as I am growing in the humility that makes the

necessary space for eucharistic graces. By being late and inattentive, I miss out on these precious gifts.

As the Liturgy of the Word commences, I need to ponder the words. Perhaps because I'm familiar with what I hear, especially the Gospels, or perhaps because the readings of the Old Testament or the Epistles may be difficult to understand, I may switch off my mind and then God's grace may not touch me. If I automatically and thoughtlessly respond, "Thanks be to God," perhaps it is not a real act of faith. Surely, the words I just heard couldn't have been the **living word of God** for me. This Word shouldn't be just what was once written down in days gone by, but words sown into my heart here and now.

I need to realize that the eucharistic celebration rises to God gradually, leads toward the great event that is going to take place on the altar. Once the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins, I may not be aware that at the Preface I am getting near the central moment when our eucharistic God becomes **actually present**. This central moment is when the priest bends and starts slowly pronouncing the words of consecration. "The moment when the Lord comes down and transforms bread and wine to become his Body and Blood cannot fail to stun,

to the very core of their being, those who participate in the Eucharist by faith and prayer.”¹

Do I realize that by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the reiteration of Christ’s words, the greatest miracle in the world is taking place? At the very moment that I am kneeling I may not realize that at this moment the very posture of bending the knee is a special prayer of adoration. Yet this gesture helps make me small not just in the gesture but within. The liturgical sign of kneeling can prompt my consciousness, inspiring ever deepening faith.

Fatima not only means the Marian apparitions, but also the extraordinary message included in eucharistic visions. From the **big host drops of blood are flowing down into the cup**. The mighty **angel** bows deeply before the host, touches the ground with his forehead in deepest worship. His whole attitude expresses **the most profound adoration**. The children of Fatima, shaken by the force of God’s presence, so intense that it almost consumes and annihilates them, receive God—the Body of Christ. The majestic might of God present in

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000, 213.

the Eucharist lasts for so long that their senses become as if suspended.²

As I realize all of this, I am speechless seeing the inadequacy of my adoration before God's grandeur coming down onto the altar. He who governs this world is actually present. He who is Alpha and Omega of human history wants to unite himself with me in a measure that is beyond my normal capacity. This God adored by multitudes of angels comes to me as love, the redeeming One, the eucharistic One to give me everything, to fulfil me abundantly. To delight me with himself so that even I, so much immersed in this world, do not want anything else, but only His eucharistic love.

² Cf. *Fatima in Lucia's Own Words (Sister Lucia's Memoirs, 1-4)*, Fátima, Portugal: Secretariado dos Pastorinhos, 2000.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS THE WAY

My participation in the Eucharist is the way of opening up to God. God in the Eucharist wishes to fill me with His redemptive graces. This is truly amazing and unique but dependent on my humble openness to receive Him, on my **disposition** for receiving grace. My personal, humble attitude needs to be vitally united with God's descent into me not just while the Liturgy lasts but in my whole life.

My interior conversion affects every aspect of my daily vision, of how I view the world. And so, even though the same people and things are all around me, I now see them quite differently.

Yet there is a mysterious paradox: The more I need faith, the less I see it in me; but the more I see how I need faith, the less I know where to look for it. Actually

this isn't so surprising since faith is a new dimension to human life. Moreover it is even more difficult as it doesn't belong to the natural. Faith is supernatural. It is God's dimension in me.

The impact of what is visible strongly tempts me to forget the Invisible. I am so engrossed in earthly life that I find it difficult to get beyond and think about this other world.

I am looking at the world You are continually creating. At the same time You are hiding Your creative powers so it seems that in human terms, all things were made by themselves. It was the same with the chosen people. You led them through the desert, surrounding them by the ceaseless miracle of manna falling to protect those You love against famine. You quenched their thirst with water from the rock. You destroyed the walls of Jericho. It was You who conquered the Promised Land for them. Still amid such miracles, the chosen people came to believe they did not need You. They thought they did it themselves by their own ingenuity and strength. They took every opportunity to leave You and serve some idol.

Is it so very different with me? You are always so brilliantly disguised so that it seems to me that grace

is not there at all. You love my freedom and hate forcing me so much that no one can hide better than You. I sometimes even think that Your grace is mine because You are so well hidden. Only in the light of faith do I see that it is You who have been working in me all the time.

You want me to ask, even beg, for the grace of growing faith when my senses and my mind do not tell me anything. You wish, thanks to this light, that I try to see the adoring angel as in the Fatima event. You wish me to join the adoring angel who is completely captivated by Your acting in the Eucharist. You want Your presence to captivate me too as You, our infinite God, are worthy of unending glory.

I am not happy with being unable to see God on the altar. I feel like crying out: "Lord that I may see!" I am like the blind man in Jericho. I cannot remain indifferent before this mystery that is so much worshipped by the angel. Through the apparition, it is as if he wanted to tell me to do the same thing, at least to try.

It is very difficult to believe. Yet faith urges me forward to discover this extraordinary God who both reveals and hides himself so perfectly. He loves me

yet He is invisible. Without faith I would despair. I am unaware that He is so close to rescue me from any threat. I do not need to fear anything. I am coming to You in an incredible way. You go ahead, and you make me walk in the footsteps You have left just for me.

LIKE THE PRODIGAL SON

“**T**o prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins.” This is what I hear frequently at Mass in the Introductory Rites. I am standing before God trying to realize how important it is for me to acknowledge that I am a sinner. Without this my heart cannot be purified. No way can my hardheartedness be softened and my purification take place unless I open myself up. Unless I admit my sinfulness, a grace-preventing obstacle remains.

One kind of hardheartedness chooses the way of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. But then if I do not repent, I resemble the hardheartedness of the younger one who walked out on his father prior to returning to him.

“We are all prodigal.”¹ I am driving my car while taking note of the people I pass en route. I am thinking they are also prodigal sons and daughters. Because of original sin we all share the same wounded, confused human nature. There is a barrier of self-sufficiency inducing me to reject my need for God and His eucharistic presence. Many of us prodigal ones go to Sunday Mass without realizing that in practice we are living as though we have no need for God and Mass. Often we go just out of a sense of duty. Yet this attitude makes me nothing other than my own god. For close union with the almighty One, I need to become aware of my prodigality just like the son in the parable.

I am on my way to church to attend Mass. I am not thinking about God. However, I am thinking that since I’m going, I must have some belief. My religious life is mostly going through rituals, now and then passionately. I am just like the people of Nazareth or Capernaum. The people of the first wanted to kill Jesus, the people of the other did not trust his words. Unless I change radically, I will never discover Him in the eucharistic reality. The Eucharist will just remain one of my rituals.

¹ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 5.

The people of Nazareth or Capernaum followed religious observances but they had never chosen Jesus. Strong interior barriers blocked them from belief. It was about the people of Capernaum that Jesus uttered the woes of Matthew 11:22.

To choose Jesus is to allow grace to crush the barriers in my heart. Those big barriers of trust in my own abilities and self-confidence need to collapse. If my trust is in myself, I am self-centered, not Jesus- or Eucharist-centered.

How can God infuse His love into me if I am only full of self-confidence? This self-centeredness is a huge barrier to the infusion of His eucharistic love. It needs to collapse so that I can allow myself to be transformed by eucharistic love.

There are three turning points in that famous parable of the prodigal son. The first is when the son leaves his father's house. The second is the breakdown of his former life and the crisis so deep that he had never experienced before. That was when he had to take up pig farming, didn't get paid and was starving. The third turning point is when he is returning to his father who is all love.

Each event inspires a special consideration. In the first, there is the self-sufficiency in his desire to leave his father until the moment of his crisis. The second is the return to his father's house. He is full of uncertainty and some hidden human hope. Finally comes the unexpected enlightening astonishment that must have made him speechless—that unexpectedly positive, warm, loving, welcome home.

All of us prodigal sons and daughters resist God's grace. I cannot believe in the eucharistic presence unless I believe I am prodigal. Insofar as I learn to believe this, God's loving presence can grow in me. I cannot start my return to the loving Father unless I am convinced I am a needy prodigal. However, to start the way back I need a trial of faith so that I realize in some small or big way that I am helpless. The situation will remind us of that critical moment when that famous prodigal son becomes a pig farmer.

Every one of us is prodigal. Human life is a continual departure from God. It needs to be a continual return to Him. Even if I do not suffer pangs of conscience, the wound of original sin constantly makes itself felt. In my life there are always two directions—"from" and "to" the Father. That means conversion needs to be a

regular event in my Christian life. "Conversion is never once and for all but is a process, an interior journey through the whole of life."²

To believe in the Lord's presence on the altar means I need to remember I am prodigal. It is not easy because my constant self-satisfaction keeps telling me that although I am prodigal, I am already safely in the Father's arms. Yet the prodigal son had to leave before he returned into those arms.

He may not have been so far away that he couldn't be in touch at times. Maybe father and son were actually in close contact. They may even have embraced, but the unconscious attitude of the prodigal was always dormant within him until that great return.

The younger son could have been totally convinced that he loved his father. We often lead very superficial sorts of lives. Living on the surface, he didn't find out what was actually deeply hidden within him. It is easier not to discover that inner twilight zone because then I can live comfortably self-satisfied. It is very pleasant when everything is well between my father and me. Appearances are highly convenient.

² Benedict XVI, General Audience, Ash Wednesday, February 21, 2007.

Presumably the prodigal son had to leave because of this kind of falsehood. His father allowed him to go in order to regain him, not superficially with many exterior appearances, but more deeply. The surgeon has to cut through tissue so he can heal. When God wants to offer me the gift of the Eucharist, He has to remove what lies on the surface through trials. Sometimes they are painful. I don't deeply believe I am prodigal and constantly departing so I don't believe I should be constantly returning. I don't believe because in the depth of my being there is a resistance to healing grace. I never dream that my ever patient eucharistic Father is waiting for me.

Of course I am not bound to stumble or fall. But if I am not open to the idea that I am prodigal, I shall have no experience of that love. Like St. Thérèse of Lisieux, I need to see my twilight zone through the light of faith. That great saint found God forgave her more than Mary Magdalene,³ If I don't think like that, I will have to become another Mary Magdalene. I will have to become a pig farmer; however, God does not want

³ "I . . . know that Jesus has *forgiven me more than St. Mary Magdalene* since He forgave me *in advance* by preventing me from falling." *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*; Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976; 83.

this, because the way of a prodigal son who has fallen so low is accompanied by the way of a father's loving tears and sorrow.

I realize that I should listen intently to the words of the Introductory Rites. The encouragement is there: Let us acknowledge that we are sinners—I need to accept with faith that I am prodigal so that I will really experience the mercy that will pour into the participants of the sacrifice of the cross as the eucharistic celebration makes it present.

Graces from the eucharistic altar flow into me insofar as I am humble, in the measure that I understand that I will never manage my life without God. I need His indescribable love. I need Jesus in the Eucharist to make up for my poverty of having no personal, supernatural good within me. If my humility is beginning to reach the depth of the humility of the prodigal son, I will experience how much I am loved. Just like the prodigal, I need the fulfilment of Jesus in the Eucharist. God **gives Himself completely** only to those who are **desperately needy**.