

EUCCHARISTIC ADORATION in the CHURCH and in MONASTIC LIFE **Some thoughts**

Introduction

Almost 16 years ago, I found myself - quite by accident – at Benediction in a Belmont Parish church in Swansea. Not a Catholic at that time, I considered the whole thing a lot of superstitious mumbo-jumbo. Just 6 months later, (and perhaps a shade more humble) I was back at the same place, this time to be received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. So, you will understand that I have no problem in accepting the efficacy of Eucharistic Adoration! Until recently, however, I had not given much thought to the theology behind the practice. Some of you may have seen the article on this subject by Fr Jean-Marie Hennaux S.J. which appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* last Autumn¹ and which has been translated by Dom Giles Conacher OSB of Pluscarden (See the September issue of *Faith*). I found this article most stimulating and it helped to crystallize some thoughts which had been developing in relation to my work in formation (I've had the responsibility for the novitiate for almost 3 years). So, I am grateful for the opportunity of sharing these thoughts with you and will be most interested to learn something about the practice of Eucharistic Adoration in other houses.

After putting the question in context, I propose to offer a summary of Fr Hennaux's article (without, it is hoped, introducing too many distortions, though I would strongly recommend reading the original) interspersed with some annotations of a novice-mistress. I shall try to indicate when we move from one mode to the other!

Context: The interface between Monastic and Church cultures – some questions.

We know, from RB 3 (v.3) that, 'the Lord often reveals what is better to the more junior' who should, therefore, be listened to and also in RB 53 (v.2) on guests, we are told that 'proper honour should be given to all, especially to those who share our faith,' and indeed, the visiting monk may, 'even make some reasonable criticisms or observations...as it is possible that the Lord sent him to the monastery for this very purpose'. (RB 61:4)

So, the Rule enjoins on us an **OPENNESS** to the newcomer, the faithful, the visitor, not simply in our offering of material hospitality but also in our being open to what they think and say – to what they bring from the culture they represent. Those on the interface between monastic culture and the wider church culture, between the ecclesia and the ecclesiola, are to be given a hearing, not just out of politeness but because they help to bring new life to the monastery and ensure that we do not become a monastic ghetto cut off from the church we serve. They help us listen to what the Spirit might be trying to say to our 'little church'.

I'd like to consider Eucharistic Adoration in that broader framework of the relationship between the culture of the wider church and the monastic culture. How much do we accept of what newcomers bring from their parish experience? Or do we expect them to become totally enculturated into the monastic culture they find, as they find it?

¹ *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 123 (2001) pp 574-582

We are all aware of the centrality of Eucharistic Adoration in the New Ecclesial movements from Focolare to the Foyers de Charité which have seen so much growth in recent years. The same is true of the newer religious orders such as the Jerusalem Community in France and the United States, where young people seem to be attracted by, among other factors, the element of Eucharistic Adoration. In parishes, too, there has been a marked renewal of devotion to this form of worship which is surely linked to the universal call to holiness and responds well to the needs of the faithful for direct access to the Blessed Sacrament at a time when frequent or even regular masses may no longer be possible owing to the shortage of priests. The parish I attended before entering the monastery now has Eucharistic Adoration for 5 hours every Friday afternoon and it is by no means unusual in this. (The change in name, from 'Exposition' or 'Benediction' to 'Eucharistic Adoration' is surely significant, marking a shift in emphasis away from what the president of the assembly does to the action of the assembly itself.)

I have noticed these trends coming through in the attitudes of our recent entrants as well as from enquirers interested in monastic life. There seems to be a deep hunger for the Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament which it is hard *not* to see as the Spirit speaking to the Churches. And, as always, the Spirit knows the needs of the age: the need for exposure to the transcendent (of which Cardinal Hume spoke so powerfully in his last years); the need for silence; the need for focus and simplicity in a world bombarded by a multiplicity of images. How have we reacted in the monasteries to these strong currents in the church? Has our response been adequate to the demand? The contemplative novice directors at their conference last September in Whitby were challenged by one of the speakers to ask themselves whether they were still working out of a 1960's mindset rather than being open to the needs and aspirations of the present generation. Has there, perhaps, been insufficient theological underpinning to our Eucharistic practice outside mass so that it has tended to remain a dispensable 'extra' devotion for those who like that sort of thing, rather than being at the heart of our community Eucharistic life?

It is this theological meaning of Eucharistic Adoration which Jean-Marie Hennaux S.J. (of the Theological Institute in Brussels) seeks to explore and which I will now attempt to outline.

Eucharistic Adoration by Fr Jean-Marie Hennaux S.J. – a summary

His main thesis is that Eucharistic Adoration cannot be detached from the Mass. To make memorial of what Jesus fulfilled at the Last Supper leads to adoration of his real and definitive presence beyond the precise moment of the liturgical celebration.

He says:

“When the Church speaks of the “*real* Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, she does not intend only to affirm that Christ is *really* present in the bread and wine. She also wishes to express the fact that the sacramental presence of the Lord in the bread and wine is the sign of his *definitive* or eschatological presence in our history. ‘Real presence’ and ‘eschatological presence’ are practically equivalent expressions. The eschatological presence of the Lord has 2 aspects:

1. By his incarnation, death and resurrection the Son of God has made himself present to our universe (both to persons and to the material universe) in a

- definitive and irrevocable fashion; in Christ history has already and forever reached its fulfilment – the “last times,” foretold by the prophets, have begun.
2. However, this fulfilment attained in Christ and by Christ has not yet produced all its effects.”

The result of this relationship between the 2 dimensions of the real or eschatological presence of Christ is that our Eucharistic devotion likewise and necessarily has 2 complementary expressions: the celebration of Mass and Eucharistic Adoration outside of Mass. (see [diagram](#))

Formation Implication:

The Formation directive, *Potissimum institutionis*, reminds those responsible for formation of ‘the affinity which exists between a contemplative vocation and the mystery of the Eucharist.’ (para.78) This affinity is brought out clearly in John 6. Compare John 6: 40,

For it is my Father’s will that everyone who looks upon (theoro) the Son and puts his faith in him shall possess eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day (eschata).

and John 6: 54, *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*)

Building on devotion to the Blessed Sacrament can only serve to strengthen this affinity. I would see a parallel between the monastic ideal of continuous prayer growing out of the more concentrated specific times of prayer and the prolongation of Eucharistic awareness outside the time of Mass by Eucharistic Adoration. I understand, from conversations with those who have more experience in formation than I, that adoration of the Blessed Sacrament can be an especially powerful support for novices who have passed beyond the initial fervour of monastic life and may be struggling with trials of faith or accidie.

Part 1 looks at Jesus’ Eucharistic Act at the Last Supper and opens with St Luke’s version of the words of institution: The Lord, ‘took bread and after giving thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my Body given for you’.

Thus, Jesus is present both in his body and outside his body in the proffered bread. Such ecstatic presence – to be outside oneself – is only possible through love. And it is this outgoing love which forms Jesus’ disciples into his mystical body, as St Paul expresses it to the Corinthians: ‘Since there is only one bread we are all one body for we all share in the one bread’. (I Cor 10 : 17)

The condition for Christ’s going beyond himself in this way, to pass into the bread and so into his own, was bodily death – the bread is ‘broken’, the body ‘given for you’, the blood, ‘poured out’.

There follows a piece on transubstantiation which I feel it would be safer to quote directly:

“ People do not see clearly enough that it is also because the man Jesus loves us to death and in a purely ecstatic fashion that what we call ‘transubstantiation’ is possible. It is not just a miracle of divine power...it is also a miracle of the human love of Jesus for his Father and for us...it is necessary for the man Jesus to die completely to himself.”

So, to contemplate the host, says Hennaux, is to contemplate and adore an act of love which succeeded perfectly. Into such love are we called, *-love one another as I have loved you* – and it is completely beyond us! We cannot hope to share in it except by recognising that such love comes from a source outside ourselves. Thus it is argued that the adoration of Christ in the host allows us to respect the whole of the mystery of the Eucharist in its transcendence as well as its immanence, (inside us after communion).

Formation Implication:

Contemplation of Christ's complete gift of himself in Eucharistic Adoration can help foster an attitude of reverence and, by putting us in an existentially right relationship to God, engenders a spirit of humility. Humility is impossible to teach and most of us find it difficult to learn. Michael Casey, in his recent book on the subject, *Truthful Living* devotes the first 20 or so pages to looking at the particular difficulties – some of them legitimate – which our age has with this disposition of humility. It may be that the affinity between Eucharistic Adoration and humility goes some way to explaining the current surge in interest in this practice. We often have a sub- or unconscious knowledge of what we most need spiritually as well as physically. So, I'm suggesting that the practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is one way of helping to inculcate a spirit of humility.

In Part II of the article, the focus broadens from the individual to the group, 'THE MANY'.

This section begins with the Eucharistic institution narratives of Mark and Matthew:

“He took some bread, gave it to them and said, ‘Take, this is my body’. Then he took the cup..., and he said to them: ‘This is my blood, the blood of the Covenant, poured out for the many.’”

We are reminded that in Semitic thought ‘the many’ may (but need not necessarily) include the totality and so the import of these words of institution is that Christ's Eucharistic act potentially gathers the whole of humanity into a unity. This is illustrated by reference to Chapter 6 of St John's gospel which plays constantly on the relationship between the crowd – the immediate beneficiaries of the miraculous meal – and the many – the totality they prefigure. The author then goes on to apply this teaching to our own Eucharistic life and identifies the same tension between those who participate in the eucharistic meal and the wider ‘all’ of humanity. Our individual communities communicate but this communion cannot be equated with the gathering of all into unity which Christ has already made possible by his eucharistic act. And so, it is suggested, if we wish to make an adequate response to the depth [and breadth, SL] of the Mystery of the Eucharist beyond our own communion we must adore the real presence of Christ which is already in communion with the whole of mankind. In this sense Eucharistic adoration is missionary and its neglect leaves us open to the danger of closing in on ourselves and our own little worlds, thwarting the mission of Christ whose flesh was given up ‘for the life of the world’.

The **Formation Implications** should be clear enough for a missionary congregation. We have also Pope John Paul's reminder, in *Vita consecrata* (para.77) of the missionary nature of all contemplative life. On a more practical level, we need to

remember that newcomers can feel cut off, even in an integrated novitiate, and that their own problems often loom large. Such feelings of isolation may come from finding themselves in a situation of powerlessness after perhaps having held responsible jobs before entering the monastery. (Though it is also true that the novitiate experience has something of an irreducibly solitary core.) The missionary aspect of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament helps develop a sense of connectedness with the wider church and the world and is something in which newcomers can participate on a completely equal footing with the professed from day one of entry.

Part III : The Resurrection of the Body

This continues the eschatological thrust of the article with further reflection on John 6.

“The will of him who sent me is that I lose nothing of what he has given me, but *that I raise it up on the last day*” (Jn. 6:39); “This bread is that which comes down from heaven so that whoever eats of it *may not die*” (Jn. 6:50); “Whoever eats my body and drinks my blood, *has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day*” (Jn. 6: 54). (This bread) is not like that which our fathers ate: they are dead; whoever eats this bread *will live forever*” (Jn. 6:58).

From this the author goes on to outline our assimilation into the Risen Body of Christ by our assimilation of his Body and Blood, and so, to quote directly:

“The contemplation of ‘Christ in us’ which we practise in our thanksgiving after communion also calls for the contemplation of ‘us (flesh and spirit) in Christ’ which we practise... in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.”

Formation Implications:

This practise both demands and strengthens FAITH. As Benedictines we believe that Christ is present in the Abbot, in the guest, in the sick, in each member of the community. Faith is *the* essential for community living and an area which needs particular strengthening in initial formation before the newcomer is fully incorporated into the body of the community.

Closely linked to the Resurrection of the Body is the final section of the article on **The Assumption of the Material Universe to Christ**. I quote:

“God’s salvation concerns the whole of creation. God does not wish to ‘lose’ anything of what he has created. At the Parousia the material universe itself will be transformed and in some way taken up into the glorified Body of the Risen one. All things having been “created in Christ” (Col.1: 16) all will be saved by him.” And so, it is argued, that Eucharistic adoration puts us in right relationship, not with God alone but also with the material elements of creation and saves us from succumbing to the prevalent attitude that the natural universe is something to be dominated.

Such a cosmic, creation-centred vision of Eucharistic adoration is one which surely has the power to speak to our generation, for it is often the language they speak themselves. Do they find us alive to these issues? Do they find our concern for the environment incarnated not only in what we sing in the psalms but also in the practical aspects of our community life?

So, in summary, the main theological points underpinning the practice of Eucharistic Adoration as outlined in this article are:

1. Its eschatological significance: the sign of Christ's definitive but not yet fully realized presence in the world.
2. Its transcendental pull: drawing us into relationship with a source outside ourselves.
3. Its missionary role: connecting us with all those for whom Christ's real presence is not actual and sending us out to them in prayer and mission.
4. Its cosmic dimension: the destiny of ourselves and the whole cosmos to be taken up in Christ.

I have tried to suggest that since monastic life also shares these 4 characteristics: the eschatological, the transcendent, the missionary and the cosmic, there should be a natural place for Eucharistic devotion in our monastic praxis and therefore in how we form our novices. I have asked whether we have taken on board the remarkable revival of interest in this form of worship alive in the wider church or whether we consider it somehow irrelevant to monastic life.

Fr Hennaux's article concludes with the assertion that far from opposing our participation in the Mass, that very participation calls for adoration of the Eucharist outside of Mass. He ends with 2 questions to which I would like to add a third.

So, how do we regard Eucharistic Adoration?

- Is it a passing fad, a fleeting and accidental devotional current which belongs to a past age?
- Is it, as Archbishop Ullathorne said of the rosary, good for 2 main types of people – those who like it and those who don't?²
- Or is it, as outlined above, the normal complement of our participation in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ?

Notes:

1. Mass = a sacramental action limited to a precise span of time.
2. The Reserved Blessed Sacrament = a sacramental sign of the continuing presence of the Crucified-Risen Jesus in the Church and in the world. *And know that I am with you always until the end of time.* (Matthew 28 : 20)
3. Adoration = “ ‘hearing’ each time one enters the Presence the utterly self-giving love... and desiring to respond with all one has, drawing from the fullness of [his] surrender.” (Sr Rachel Gregory ODC)

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Dame Laurentia Johns for EBC Liturgy Symposium, Belmont 6 June 2002

² Cardinal Gasquet, *Religio religiosi (SAP)* p 119