

The EUCCHARIST

50 QUESTIONS *From the* PEWS

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INTRODUCTION

Religious practices are a kind of language, a way of communicating something important. The celebration of the liturgical rites, especially the Eucharist, is a great symphony of gestures, signs, symbols, words, and relationships. Devotional practices are also a language. They can communicate a profound personal longing for God that official liturgical practices don't always address adequately.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have been invited by Church leadership to engage in a spiritual renewal that finds its source and summit in the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. Devotional prayer is one aspect of the Church's renewal that has gained momentum, reviving rites and rituals that are new and unknown to many. The people in the pews have many questions about them.

The fifty questions in this booklet were raised by people from several midwestern parishes. The editors of Liguori Publications surfaced these questions as a way of giving voice to the concerns of laypeople interested in understanding what we do in prayer and how the Eucharist and eucharistic devo-

tions form the core of the spiritual renewal of the baptized community. In answering these questions, I used pastoral experience, Church documents, and common sense. A complete list of sources begins on page 91.

I hope my answers prompt further thinking about the questions, perhaps even dialogue with others who have interest in the Eucharist. I also hope that by understanding the eucharistic and devotional practices addressed by these questions, people will have a fuller and richer participation in the mystery of Christ and the Spirit at the heart of all prayer. Understanding what we do *as we do it* creates rich insight. Such attentive awareness allows God's voice to speak in the language of our lives and hearts.

RICHARD N. FRAGOMENI, PHD

AUGUST 1, 2008

THE FEAST OF SAINT ALPHONSUS LIGUORI



Part I

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS

1. What is spiritual communion?

Spiritual communion is a unique Roman Catholic devotional practice not to be confused with *sacramental* Communion, the participation in the mystery of Christ by eating and drinking the Body and the Blood of the Lord.

The development of spiritual communion as a devotion can be traced to Saint Alphonsus Liguori. Basically, it's a form of spiritual yearning to be in communion with Christ during those times when his sacramental gift cannot be shared.

To share in sacramental communion, one must be aware of no unconfessed serious sin against God's commands and be in good standing with the Roman Catholic Church. With exceptions for age and health, one must also have fasted from all food and all beverages except water for one hour before receiving sacramental Communion (also see question 46).

Some Catholics are unable to share sacramental Commu-

nion because of sickness, geographic distance from a Roman Catholic community, or unavailability of priests.

Any Christian who wishes to have spiritual communion with the Lord can do so by taking a moment to consider God's love demonstrated to us in the life, passion, and death of Christ. Give thanks to God for this wonderful gift, and say a prayer of spiritual communion such as this one written by Saint Alphonsus Liguori:

My Jesus, I believe you are really here
in the Blessed Sacrament.
I love you more than anything in the world,
and I hunger to receive you.
But since I cannot receive Communion at this
moment, feed my soul at least spiritually.
I unite myself to you now as I do
when I actually receive you.
Never let me drift away from you.

FROM *VISITS TO JESUS AND MARY*
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2. What is the symbolic relationship between the altar and the Eucharist?

The altar, also called the table of the Lord, is not just a piece of furniture. Our early Christian ancestors gathered at dining-room tables for the Eucharist, and through the centuries that simple piece of furniture came alive with deep meanings we still cherish.

It is from the altar that we share in the Eucharist, and the

altar resonates with the presence of Christ. The altar is consecrated by a bishop and anointed with chrism just as Christ was anointed priest, prophet, and king. In many places, the altar also contains the relics of martyrs and saints.

The gestures and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church express the sentiments of our faith and our hearts. We bow and genuflect to express reverence, honor, and devotion. These gestures are used not only by Roman Catholics and other Christians, but by various other people of faith, including Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists.

After the consecrated host and chalice are raised and shown to the assembly by the priest, he genuflects, and any concelebrants bow to the host and chalice. Norms exist for bowing to the altar and, at some points of the eucharistic celebration, kissing the altar. The kiss is a more intimate act of showing reverence and honor.

The altar is a tangible sign of Christ. We bow to the altar during the eucharistic liturgy and outside of the Mass as well, because for Roman Catholics it's the central place of our encounter with Christ and with the great communion of saints.

3. My church has many Spanish traditions, one of which is the procession. Why are processions important, and why don't more churches have them?

The *procession* is an ancient form of prayer found in most religions. Some psalms from the Jewish tradition speak about processing to the Temple. In fact, Psalm 43:4 is used in the Latin Mass during the prayers at the foot of the altar.