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Perpetual eucharistic adoration

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

There was a front-page story in *The Boston Globe* last month signaling the return of perpetual eucharistic adoration to Boston.

In the 1940s a group of cloistered nuns began the practice of eucharistic adoration at St. Clement's Shrine, a former Universalist church that had been purchased by the archdiocese of Boston to accommodate the overflow crowds from St. Cecelia's parish in the Back Bay section of the city.

Soon there was a nocturnal adoration society formed. However, in the 1960s, with changes in the Catholic church and in the neighborhood, the practice of perpetual adoration at St. Clement's Shrine died out?only to be restored this year.

The *Globe* article provoked a few comments from readers some of whom are convinced of the paper's anti-Catholic bias. Letter-writers criticized the reporter's constant reference to the consecrated eucharistic host as a "wafer."

They also faulted him for failing to recognize the important doctrinal and theological difference between Christ's "sacramental" presence in the Eucharist and a "literal" presence, that in centuries past gave rise to charges of cannibalism against Catholics.

I happen to know the *Globe* reporter, Michael Paulson, and have been interviewed by him many times over the years. Although Paulson is an excellent reporter, he would never claim to be a theologian, but neither is he anti-Catholic. If there were any lapses in his article, they were made unintentionally and certainly without malice.

It was unfortunate, to be sure, that he constantly referred to the eucharistic host as a "wafer,"

"consecrated" or not. However, the distinction between a "wafer" and a "host," that some letter-writers were quick to insist upon, would be lost on non-Catholics (the *Globe* reporter himself is not a Christian), and indeed on most Catholics as well.

The constant use of the word "wafer" did lead some readers to conclude that the practice of eucharistic adoration is nothing less than a form of idolatry. How else explain why someone would sit or kneel hour after hour in adoration of a simple "wafer"?

It was also unfortunate that Paulson described the Catholic belief in the Real Presence (a technical theological and doctrinal term that did not appear in the story) as a "literal" transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus during Mass. The transformation (the medieval word was "transubstantiation") is sacramental, not literal or physical.

In other words, the bread and the wine retain the properties of bread and wine. They look like bread and wine and taste like bread and wine, but Catholics (and many other Christians as well) believe that the bread and wine have been *sacramentally* changed into the body and blood of Christ.

Thus, the bread and wine may still appear to be bread and wine, but in the course of the Eucharistic Prayer (formerly called the Canon of the Mass) they have been changed sacramentally, not literally or physically, into the body and blood of Christ. Paulson did quote Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley correctly on the "sacramental presence of Christ" in the Eucharist.

It should be pointed out that the church has always condemned devotional excesses that contradicted its official teachings. One of those excesses was the mistaken belief that, if the host were scratched, it would bleed.

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Another excess that unfortunately perdured into the mid-20th century in some parishes was the practice of putting the consecrated host "to bed" following Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and accompanied by the singing of "Good Night Sweet Jesus," as the church lights were turned off, one by one from the back of the church to the front.

The practice of eucharistic adoration began in the 12th century, when the Real Presence of Christ was widely rejected by heretics or misunderstood by poorly educated Catholics. The church saw eucharistic adoration as a way of reaffirming its faith in the Real Presence and of promoting renewed devotion to it.

However, as time went on, eucharistic devotions, including adoration, drifted further and further away from their liturgical grounding in the Mass itself.

Notwithstanding Pope Benedict XVI's personal endorsement of eucharistic adoration and the sporadic restoration of the practice in the archdiocese of Boston and elsewhere, it is difficult to speak favorably about the devotion today.

Now that most Catholics are literate and even well-educated, the Mass is in the language of the people (i.e., the vernacular), and its rituals are relatively easy to understand and follow, there is little or no need for extraneous eucharistic devotions. The Mass itself provides all that a Catholic needs sacramentally and spiritually.

Eucharistic adoration, perpetual or not, is a doctrinal, theological, and spiritual step backward, not

forward.

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