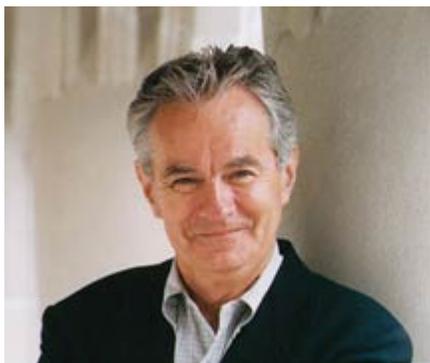


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A tiny, humble piece of bread

by Thomas C. Fox



Paul Wilkes

Catholic writer Paul Wilkes' latest opus, Holding God in My Hands: Personal Encounters with the Divine, is a book of contemporary parables focused on the Eucharist. In particular, it is series of stories about Wilkes' ministry, bringing God, in the form of a host, to the sick and dying. Each story, then, becomes a springboard for spiritual reflection. Author of more than 20 books, Wilkes is also a contributor to the National Catholic Reporter.



Fox: Why this book?

Wilkes: I'm a eucharistic minister at my local hospital. I've been doing this for 15 years. I go every week. I've probably seen 5,000 patients. I've been keeping track of the people I talk to, and if I would see them again I would make a note or two about what their condition was or what I or my parish might be able to do for them. The stories just started to occur.

You write about bringing the real presence of God as you visit patients. What's that like?

Ask 10 Catholics what transubstantiation means. I don't think you're going to get the same answer, but ask 10 Catholics what 'real presence' means and I think you're going to get the same answer, pretty much. I don't know how this works, Tom, believe me, but it's God in our midst in that humble, tiny piece of unleavened, tasteless bread.

When you bring the Eucharist what kind of reaction do you get?

Well, Tom, it would run the gamut from 'How did you know I was here?' and 'I'm so happy you're here,' to 'I shut God out of my life a long time ago.' So it's all in between there. I think that oftentimes the person might be groggy or not feeling well, but 95 percent of the time they really appreciate a visitor, and a visitor who is not going to jab them with a needle, not going to ask them any questions about their name, rank and serial number.

How do you feel ministering to the sick and dying?

Humility. ... To think that I, layman, Paul Wilkes, can walk into a hospital with the presence of God and pray with someone, touch a face and hold a hand, and give holy Communion, that's a pretty humbling experience.

There's intimacy here?

There is, Tom, because I don't just walk in a room, saying, 'This is the body of Christ ...' and I'm off. I look at the person. I look at what's happening. I can tell if the bags [under the eyes] are there and I know if there is chemo, or if there are many flowers in a room, or there's family, or cards, or grandchildren. Sometimes I'll ask what brought them into the hospital, but more often I ask about themselves.

Once I had a wonderful encounter with a fellow who built bridges in New York City. As I began to pray with him, I said, 'Lord God, here is a man who has been so brave and has built bridges that have linked land masses that have transported millions upon millions of people, and now here he is, Lord, and you are the bridge to him. Bring him your graces and bring him your healing. Let him feel your presence. Let him feel your love at this very moment, in this tiny, humble piece of bread.'

That's prayer.

Yesterday I had a cataract removed from one eye and I wore dark glasses. My eyes were a little itchy and I was under an anesthetic for 15 minutes. This is minor-league stuff compared to the people whom I visit in the hospital, but all of a sudden I realized how disoriented I was after the anesthetic.

I can understand better each time I go to the hospital how frightened people are in the hospital, and we all

are. Nobody goes into that place without being frightened. Of course, if you're going to have a baby, I guess you're going to come out the other end happier, and many people do get cured, but it's a place where people are frightened.

So I try to dispel the fright as best I can, not by being stupidly funny or anything like that. Nothing's worse than forced humor in a hospital. I mean, my God, you don't want that, but I look at them and I really try to know them as best I can. I've found something too, often if it's a really old woman, I'll reach and I'll touch her cheek, or if it's somebody I know from my parish, I'll reach and hug them. Sometimes their head is hot with fever.

You write in the book that you've seen miracles happen enough times as you brought holy Communion to patients. Tell me, what do you mean by that?

I think you see it in something as simple as a person being very, very anxious when I'd come into the room, maybe even refusing holy Communion, saying, "Oh, no, I've been away from the church for a while," or "I married outside the church," or "Fr. O'Malley told me ..." whatever, almost like saying, "No, I'm not going to do that."

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Then as I talk to them and tell them really what it's about, they come to the point where they say, "All right. I'll receive." Then they take the host and you hear that exhale, that's the miracle. That is their concern and their worry, and the next inhale is inhaling not only this host, but just inhaling God in a way, and you can see it on their face and they're calm.

You write about the irony of health and sickness. Can you elaborate?

With some sick people, their souls are sick, and with others, their souls are healthy. Here's an example. I had a woman who, I came into her room and she had two statues, 15 holy cards, nine rosaries, and she was so angry about life, about her husband that left her, about her children that didn't visit, "but I've got my faith." Well, you know, it was a brittle faith to me. It wasn't a loving faith.

Not that her faith is bad or anything like that, but it just wasn't working for her. It was such a tight hold that she felt she had on it and she never let people in; she never let the world in. I could just see that it wasn't a liberation for her. Other people I've seen just with that look on their face -- they may have a rosary there -- they just knew that God was with them, was going to stay with them.

I just had a woman last week, 80 years old, lung cancer. She says, "I'm dying, but I'm not going to hit my head against that brick wall. I'm just going to go into this knowing that God is with me and that he's waiting." Often I hear that: "He's waiting. He's waiting for me." I've prayed with many people in hospice and I've been fortunate enough to be in a room right as a person dies.

What about sin? How does it fit in when you offer the host?

Sin is not part of my equation when I go into a room. As I always say, I don't check their bar codes too carefully. I'm not asking if they've been to Mass, if they've done their Easter duty or they've been to confession in the last so-often. This is the battlefield. This is the hospital. This is the pastoral judgment we have to make as hospital eucharistic ministers -- that this person needs. The eucharist is not a reward for good behavior; it's food for the journey of life.

There's much that's fulfilling about the work you're doing. What's frustrating?

I think what's frustrating is how guilty so many Catholics feel. Fr. O'Malley, back in grade school, which

maybe was 60 years ago, told them, "If you do this, you're going to hell," and some of them really remember that and feel that way.

Tom, over a lifetime of being a not so good a guy too many years, I've always felt God's grace and I've always felt his forgiveness and his love and his compassion. So the God that I know -- and it's the only God I can talk about, it's the only God I can bring to that room -- is a God of mercy, love, compassion and with a great sense of humor. He chuckles at our stupidities and welcomes us home.

Do you feel that sometimes you're breaking church canons? Would your bishop be pleased or offended by some of the things you do?

I would invite my bishop to come with me and to see, and then I would have to have him draw that judgment at the end of our rounds together. I would actively invite him to come with me, not with his cross on, but just with a plain shirt on so people wouldn't know who he is, and just walk with me through those rooms, and then he could judge me as he would.

Who is this book written for?

As a writer, I never think about an audience. I guess I should, but I never do. As a journalist, I've always felt, "Hey, I found out something really interesting and I want to tell you about it." So there's that part about it, the journalist part that says, "These are great stories. I want to tell you."

But really, I think the book, of course, is designed for any seeker who seeks the presence of God, who wants to know what the presence of God about, how does God work in the world, what the Eucharist is about, all that, but also, of course, for eucharistic ministers, to not just feel you have to go into the room with your book, with the ritual prayers. You can walk in there as another human being and say, "Look, I'm here and let's find out what's going on. How can I be with you at this time or be of assistance to you?" and to be able to pray with people.

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