

Five Pillars of the Spiritual Life

A Practical Guide to Prayer for Active People

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Abridged Edition

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Chapter One

First Pillar: The Holy Eucharist

Introduction

The Eucharist is *the* center of Catholic spiritual life. It is Christ's unconditionally loving presence healing us, transforming us, unifying us, and granting us peace. The preciousness of this gift cannot be underestimated. There are three facets of the Eucharist that require discussion:

1. The institution and grace of the Eucharist
2. The Eucharist as universal prayer
3. The Eucharist in its relationship to the liturgy and other sacraments

I. The Institution and Grace of the Eucharist

Jesus set His face resolutely toward Jerusalem in the midst of His disciples' warning about impending persecution because He had a plan—a plan to give away His unconditionally healing and reconciling love to the world for all generations. His plan is best expressed in considering His Eucharistic words. When He said, “This is my Body which will be given up for you,” the Greek word used to translate His Hebrew (*zeh basari*) or Aramaic (*den bisri*) was *sôma* instead of *sarx*. *Sarx* means

“flesh” and would certainly refer to Jesus’ *corporeal* body given on the Cross, while *sôma* is much broader and refers to the *whole* person (mind, soul, will, as well as corporeal body). Thus, *sôma* is much like the word “body” in “everybody” or “somebody” in English. It might, therefore, be roughly translated as “person” or “self.” If we substitute the word “self” for “body” in the Eucharistic words, we obtain, “This is my whole self given up for you.” This is remarkably close to Jesus’ definition of love (“gift of self”—“greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” [Jn 15:13]). Thus, in the Eucharist, Jesus is not only giving us His whole self—His whole person—He is also giving us His love, indeed, His *unconditional* Love—that is, a love that cannot be exceeded.

This unconditional Love is corroborated by the gift of His blood (which, according to Jewish custom, is separated from the body of the sacrificial offering). When Jesus offered His blood separately from His body, He showed Himself to be an intentional self-sacrifice that He interpreted to be an offering of unconditional Love.

Blood (the principle of life for the Israelites) was the vehicle through which atonement occurred in sin or guilt offerings (which is most poignantly described in the ceremony of the scapegoat on the day of atonement). Jesus’ reference to His sacrificial blood would almost inevitably be seen as the blood of a sin offering—with the notable exception that the sin offering is no longer an animal (for example, a scapegoat), but, rather, Jesus Himself, “the Beloved One of *Abba*.” Jesus humbled Himself (taking the place of an animal—a sacrificial sin offering) as the Beloved One of the Father, to absolve the sin of the world forever.

Jesus goes beyond this by associating Himself with the paschal lamb. His use of blood within the context of the Passover supper shows that He intended to take the place of the Passover lamb. He loved us so much that He desired to become the new Passover sacrifice, replacing an unblemished lamb with His own divine presence.

You may recall that the blood of the Passover lamb (put on the doorposts of every Israelite household) was the instrument through which the Israelite people were protected from death (the angel of death passing over those houses), which enabled them to move out of slavery into freedom (from Egypt into the promised land). When Jesus took the place of a sacrificial animal, He replaced the situational dimension of the Passover (Egypt) with an unconditional and eternal Love. Thus, He made His self-sacrifice the new vehicle for protection from *all* death (for all eternity) by outshining sin and darkness with His unconditionally loving eternal light.

There is yet a third dimension of Jesus' use of blood that He explicitly states as "the blood of the covenant." A covenant was a solemn promise that bound parties to an inextricable (guaranteed) agreement. (Written contracts were *extremely* rare during Jesus' time.) When Jesus associates His blood with the covenant, He is *guaranteeing* the "absolution from sin," "freedom from slavery and darkness," and eternal life given through His unconditional Love. By referencing the blood of the *covenant*, Jesus makes a solemn and unconditionally guaranteed promise of eternal life and love through Him.

What does Jesus intend this total gift of Himself will bring? Peace, transformation, and unification both now and (unconditionally) in the kingdom to come. I can attest to the remarkable efficacy of all three of these graces in my own life.

With respect to peace, I can remember going to Mass with very disturbing thoughts in my mind (having received bad news, or having been criticized or irritated by someone's actions, etc.). I carried the "tape playing" and emotional discharge associated with those things right into the Mass with me—which sometimes provoked an intensification of internal disturbance during the Mass. But many, many have been the times when a deep calm (beyond myself) replaced that disturbance as I approached and received the Holy Eucharist. I have difficulty attributing this change of condition to mere self-delusion, because wishful thinking has never overcome "intense disturbance" in any other circumstance in my life. Why the Holy Eucharist? Why so frequently? Hmm. . . .

With respect to transformation, in my junior year of college I decided to begin attending daily Mass because of the encouragement of some friends. I was not at the same level of humility and generosity as those friends (indeed, I had some deep-seated utilitarian, egotistical, and materialistic tendencies). Nevertheless, I felt attracted to the prospect through my faith. After about a year, my friends began to comment that I "had really changed." I told them (quite sincerely) that I had not—I was "the same old person." It seemed I was the only one who had not noticed the gradual but cumulative change that had occurred in my heart. I had always said that rationality could be trusted but the emotions could not. This had the unfortunate effect of producing affective and social retardation, but I nevertheless thought it to be true. Now, in retrospect, I attribute my discovery and re-appropriation of my heart to the gradual transformative influence of the Holy Eucharist. I do not consider this incredible life-giving discovery to have arisen out of normal

maturation (I was anything but normal), nor do I attribute it to something desired or willed (because I really did not want a heart—I did not trust my emotions), nor do I attribute it to appropriating the emotional conditions of the people around me (because I did not “hang around” the daily Mass group). Rather, I believe that the Eucharist battered my heart or, perhaps better, prepared my heart for the simple exposure to the Word of God, and to the love of God manifest through others at Mass. Slowly but surely Christ’s presence and love turned me toward the grace to which I could not bring myself. I received a heart, not a completed heart, but a “foundational heart” opening upon a deeper and deeper appropriation of the unconditional Love, which is the purpose of my life.

With respect to unification, Saint Paul says that we are all united in the mystical body of Christ (see 1 Cor 10:16–17); that is, we share in and derive strength from the grace, love, and joy of the whole communion of saints both past and present. I really had no idea what this meant when I was twelve years old, but I remember one particular Christmas when we had completed opening our presents and my siblings and I were going to Mass with my mother. I felt an unusually acute happiness that I could not ignore, and so I told my mother, “Mom, I’m feeling very happy, but I’m not sure why.” She said in reply, “Well, you probably received all the presents you wanted.” For some reason, I knew that it was not material happiness (coming from possession of a gift, consumption of food, playing games, and so forth), so I told her, “Mom, I did get all the presents I wanted, but that’s not what’s making me *this* happy.” She thought about that for a while, and then, with a great deal of hope, said, “Well, maybe you’re growing up and thinking of things beyond presents.

Maybe you're happy because you've grown to appreciate your family and you had a really intense experience of them at Christmas." I said in reply, "Uhhh, family? I don't really think that's it" (even though I had a really great family). So my mother thought about it some more and then said, as if inspired, "Well, maybe it's the joy of the whole communion of saints on this Christmastide coursing through your veins." I have no idea why she said this, or why I knew it was correct, but I said, "Yep, that's why I think I'm happy." To this day, that childlike response to my mother's deeply insightful remark seems to me to be truth. It is the truth about the communion of saints and the truth about the unifying power of the Eucharist. It is the truth about the love and joy of the whole communion of saints, past and present, coursing through our spiritual veins.

Years later, I had a flashback to that Christmas when I was sitting with my family at my sister's house on Easter. My little niece Kristen was a little more than a year old, and she was sitting in the middle of a crowd of us in some rigged-up chair. Someone told a humorous story that made everybody laugh, and Kristen (who did not understand a word of it) began to laugh as well. As I looked upon her empathetically sharing in the delight of everyone else, taking sublime joy in something that she could not discursively understand, I flashed back to the Christmas of the "joy of the whole communion of saints" through the Eucharist many years before.

The Eucharist truly is the center of our lives as Catholics and Christians. It is the unconditional Love of Jesus Christ unto the peace, transformation, and unification that not only lends stability but unity and finality to our lives. Saint Ignatius saw this and encouraged daily Mass, a habit that has transformed

the heart of the Church in literally billions of ways. If it is at all possible, I recommend that everyone, even in the midst of your frenetic activity, find ways to receive the Holy Eucharist during the week. It will bring a consolation leading to greater peace, efficacy, and leadership; a transformation toward the heart of Christ beyond our highest expectation; and a unity with the mystical body, which will impart an indelible stab of joy in our present lives and memories.

II. The Eucharist as Universal Prayer

There can be little doubt that Jesus intended the Eucharist to be both a universal and unifying gift. Saint Paul understood and interpreted this aspect of the Eucharist in his notion of the one body of Christ:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? . . . Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread. (1 Cor 10:16–17)

Saint John makes the universal character of this unifying body of Christ even more explicit: “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the *world*” (Jn 6:33, emphasis added). “World,” here, refers to the whole human community, which is the proper recipient of the bread from *heaven*.

The themes of “unity of believers” and “life for the world” were picked up by the early Church Fathers where the Eucharist was considered to be the communion between the faithful and their bishop. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, for example, exhorts his followers in multiple letters to maintain unity among themselves, meeting together in the Eucharist under the bishop as their head. This theme was further

emphasized in later encyclicals (for example, Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, paragraphs 19 and 51; Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, paragraph 70; and Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*). Thus, the Eucharist is the occasion to pray for the local Church community, the worldwide Church community, and the life of the world.

As noted above, the Eucharist is a remarkably beautiful and efficacious gift of *personal* transformation and life. Yet It cannot be held to the domain of the personal. By the intention of Jesus, and therefore by Its nature (Unconditional Love), It reaches out to the whole world. It gives life to those in spiritual and temporal need, It unifies the Church in Its life-giving nature and mission, and It moves through the Church to the rest of the world.

Thus, when we receive the Holy Eucharist, we not only pray for personal transformation; we pray for the Church, the unity of the Church, the life of the world, and the Church reaching out to the world in its spiritual and temporal need. This is why the Prayers of the Faithful (in the Mass) include prayers for the Church, the local community, and the world. This unifying and universal aspect is also manifest in all the Eucharistic prayers, where we pray for the Church throughout the world. We also acknowledge that the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. The Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office) joins itself to the Eucharistic liturgy and prays for the intentions of the Church and the world during morning and evening prayer. This shows the Eucharist to be a central personal devotion that reaches out beyond Itself to the Church, the whole Mystical Body, and the world.

As will be noted in chapter 3, when we offer up our prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of the day, we do it in imitation of

Jesus, Who explained the efficacy of this in His final words on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). These words are a reference to the *whole* of Psalm 22, where it is clear that the psalmist (and Jesus) are offering their sufferings as a gift of self to the Father (“gift of self” means “unconditional love”) so that *all* people (the world) might come to the Lord:

The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live for ever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. (Ps 22:26–27)

Jesus’ self-offering on the Cross (the gift in the Eucharist) is His whole person (His unconditional Love) given for the sake of all peoples, promising good news for the poor.

Mother Teresa understood well the universal and unifying power of the Eucharist within her ministry to the poor and the sick. She received the Holy Eucharist every morning before she went out to serve the poor. The healing power of the Eucharist seemed to flow through her, and the very bodies of the people she worked with mystically resembled the very Body of Christ she had received in the Eucharist: “I realize that when I touch the odorous and oozing members of a leper, I am touching the body of Christ, just as I take His body in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.”

Thus, when we receive the Eucharist (with Its peace, forgiveness, healing, and transformation) in our *personal* lives, we should also offer this most precious gift for the Church and her unity, and for the life of the world (particularly those in spiritual and temporal need). When we do this, we can be sure that the Father will honor our offering

just as He honored the offering of His Son in giving His life and love to the world. When we offer our reception of the Eucharist for the Church and the “world in need,” Christ’s love works through our participation in His mystical body, and the grace and benefit that this offering bestows on the world comes back to us as a blessing from all the people we have held in our hearts. This blessing is rich indeed, for it brings us into solidarity with the Church throughout the world and the “world in need,” which brings the reciprocal nature of that love back to us. There is a profound beauty here, not only in being mindful of those in need, not only in sharing Christ’s love with them, but also in receiving their unique and precious blessing into us. In Christ’s mystical body every blessing given is a blessing received.

III. The Eucharist and the Liturgy

The Eucharist’s unifying, healing, and transformational power is brought more fully alive through the liturgy in which It is embedded. Its healing power is linked to the Penitential Rite; Its unifying power to the prayers for the Church and the world; Its inspirational and transformational powers to the Liturgy of the Word; Its communion to the congregation; Its splendor to the beauty of song and action; Its transcendent meaning to the liturgical symbols and the architecture of the church; Its “continuity with the past life of the Church” to Its traditions; and Its “continuity with the kingdom of heaven” to the Eucharistic prayers.

Jesus’ action at the Last Supper was simple, but the profundity of this action caused later generations to layer on additional elements of splendor in order to express its magnificence. The liturgy not only brings the community

together, it not only connects the congregation to the Church and to Jesus; it tries to express the magnificence of Jesus' unconditional Love through the Penitential Rite, the Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Prayer, and all the other elements (ranging from music to vestments to church architecture) that make our hearts soar.

The liturgy also provides the context for *communal* worship and praise. Individual worship (prayer) emphasizes intimacy and depth, while communal worship emphasizes complementarity, community, and breadth. The liturgy contains *both* communal and individual worship, for the Eucharistic Prayer (communal praise) is complemented by the deep, individual intimacy of receiving the Holy Eucharist; the communal praise of the Gloria is complemented by the individual's contrition in the Penitential Rite; the Word of God and the homily are addressed to the group but appropriated individually. The liturgy is a masterwork of communal and individual worship in their reinforcing and synergistic complementarity, a symphony of breadth and depth opening itself to the grace of God through the group to the individual, and through the individual to the group.

IV. The Eucharist and the Other Sacraments

The Eucharist interacts with the other sacraments of the Church. Volumes have been written about the interrelationship between the Eucharist and the sacraments of Baptism, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Confirmation, Marriage, and, of course, Holy Orders. The objective, here, is not to write another volume on the interrelationship among the sacraments, but rather to encourage you to expand your thinking about the Eucharist in two respects:

1. To see the Eucharist as the ongoing empowerment of the grace of your Baptism, Confirmation, and Marriage or Holy Orders (through the unconditional Love of Jesus Christ)
2. To receive the sacrament of Penance as a focus and complement to the healing and transformative power of the Eucharist. Think of the sacrament of Penance as liberating the full healing power of the Eucharist through its particular action and grace.

This complementarity between the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance is most powerfully manifest in our attempts to move through the stages on life's way. As will be more fully explained in the Epilogue, most people move through four levels of desire, and this movement is not easy. A brief explanation here will be sufficient to make some basic points about the efficacy of the sacraments.

The first and most basic level of desire (in Latin, *laetus*) comes from an external stimulus. It interacts with one or more of the five senses and gives immediate gratification, but does not last very long. A sensorial pleasure like an ice cream cone or a possession like a new car can impart immediate gratification from these stimuli.

The second level of desire (in Latin, *felix*) comes from ego-gratification. *Ego* in Latin means "I." This kind of happiness comes whenever I can shift the locus of control from the outer world to myself. Hence, whenever I win, gain power or control, increase in status, or gain admiration or popularity, I feel happy. I feel as if my inner world is expanding. My control relative to the outer world is enhanced.

We also desire love, truth, goodness, beauty, and being. These desires initially manifest themselves as a desire to contribute. The second kind of desire seeks to shift the locus of control to the self. In the third level of desire (in Latin, *beatus*) we try to invest in the world beyond ourselves. We want to make a difference with our lives, time, energy, and talent.

Strange as it may seem, the third level of desire still does not exhaust the scope of human potential, for humans not only desire *some* love, goodness, truth, beauty, and being; they also desire *unconditional, perfect, ultimate, and even unrestricted* Love, Goodness, Truth, Beauty, and Being. In the context of faith, one might call this the desire for God. But even if one does not have faith, one can treat it as an awareness of a seemingly unconditioned horizon surrounding human curiosity, creativity, spirit, and achievement. This particular desire differentiates humans from all other animals. In Latin, this fourth level of desire is called *sublimis*.

Residual attachments to Level 1 (material possessions and physical pleasures) and Level 2 (ego-gratification and comparative advantage) can result in frustration, failed resolve, and a host of distressing affective states. Grace (through the power of prayer) can help us through these very difficult times of transition. In my view, the most powerful conduit of grace in such times is the combination of the Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance. There is something about the combination of the graces in these two sacraments that restores resolve, builds patience and peace, grants courage and strength, and manifests the presence of Christ in our lives so powerfully that we resist any urge to give up the pursuit of life in Christ. Christ's presence through the combination of these two sacraments outshines cynicism,

discouragement, and desolation; it gives us strength to run the race and to finish the course.

Summary

I now return to the fundamental truth about the Holy Eucharist. Within the context of Its universal and unifying power, within the context of the liturgy and the other sacraments, within the context of the Church through which It is offered, It is the unconditional Love of Jesus Christ given on the Cross to bring us the fullness of His peace, forgiveness, healing, and transformation unto eternal life. It is Jesus, our scapegoat, paschal lamb, blood of the covenant, and Son of God given for our lives and the life of the world. His mystery is infinite in breadth and His love is infinite in depth. For this reason, the Eucharist is the central pillar of the spiritual life of the Church, and that is why Saint Ignatius recommended its frequent reception.