

The Eucharistic Christ is unquestionably the cornerstone of the Catholic faith. It is this presence around which all other Christic presences revolve. It is our redemption through this sacrament that, as an old eucharistic prayer says, Christ "took upon himself our human nature and endured a bitter death." This sacrament is free to us, undeserved. It is the physical, palpable communion with the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ our God and redeemer. He is that stone the builders rejected that became the cornerstone - but he is being rejected again. Not simply by secularism or atheistic humanism, but by Christians who are placing our humanity above his divinity, shoving him further from the altar as we become more visible there.

There are many contemporary manifestations of this in liturgy, music and architecture. The liturgy itself is Trinitarian, but it is a Father-centered event. The sacrifice of the altar, who is Christ, is not offered to the faithful, it is offered to the Father as an oblation for our sin. We partake of the sacrifice in the sacrament, but we are not its source or inspiration. It is only because of our sinfulness and God's infinite love and mercy that we have been afforded the blessing of such a redeemer. Yet the liturgy has become wordy, cumbersome, plagued by ad-libbing and becoming more and more centered on the human element. The homily has replaced the consecration as the centerpiece of the mass. Though the homilist will often preach for an eternity, the consecration itself - the single most significant event of history - passes in an instant. Often, the elevation of the host - if there is any elevation to speak of - is a one-handed affair of seemingly careless necessity that is so brief it could easily escape notice if one were to blink. Rare and precious is the priest who bears the host or chalice aloft in adoration with all the effort of both of his anointed hands for some blessed, wondrous amount of time. Rare also is the priest who genuflects before the newly present body and blood of our Lord as the rite prescribes. Though I admit that there could be an abundance of bad knees among priests, our Holy Father in all of his frailty manages it every mass. Instead, it seems as though there is an ignorance, perhaps even in some cases a denial of the significance of that true presence of God in bread and wine. If we were to really, deeply reflect upon the nature of that presence, we should all be happy to simply be allowed to prostrate ourselves before it. This sacrament is a divine gift, not something that we are due! And yet we use it for leverage to place ourselves in positions of significance. To me, this is the only explanation for the rampant abuse of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. I cannot see this as a manifestation of devotion to our crucified Lord, but as an attempt to assert ourselves as participants in the liturgy. I do not mean to say that I believe this trend to be born from malice - rather an ignorance of true intentions. The priest's primary function is the confection and distribution of the Eucharist, as well as the hearing of confessions and the distribution of the other sacraments within his power. No other duty supplants that. The priest is *alter christus*, a sacramental being. We are to assist in the distribution of our Lord *only* in extraordinary circumstances, not simply to expedite that most important time that should be used for prayer and reflection. If there is a legitimate need to shorten the time of the mass, the music or the homily should go first - especially at daily mass where neither are required.

This elevation of the human element continues into music. No longer do we have hymns, we now have "songs." The sacred polyphony that has been the hallmark of the Church for centuries has in the last fifty years been replaced with a banal brand of folk music popularized in the feel-good sixties. I don't know how else to interpret Vatican II's assertion that "pride of place" belongs to the Organ and Gregorian Chant as the primary musical modes for mass but that the Church recommends them as most appropriate. The folk music style isn't necessarily bad, but it certainly isn't the best. (Subjectivism, as in, "but I really LIKE it," doesn't really hold water against music theory and the objective aesthetic of certain forms of music as being higher than others.) The worst thing about popular Church music is the lyrics. Take for example "Amazing Grace," which has somehow worked itself into the Catholic repetoir. The song is pure Lutheranism. Yet this song is more substantive than many in our own USB. These are the sorts of songs that supplant "Tantum Ergo Sacramentum," "Salve Regina," "Panis Angelicus" or even Aquinas's theological beauty "Jesus my Lord my God my All." I know the Latin-haters out there would contest my choice of music, but the Church still considers Latin its "living language." (If the pope uses it, it should be good enough for anybody.) The argument that it is unintelligible doesn't really bear much weight either. My 12 year old sister doesn't speak a word of Latin, but she wanders around the house singing Latin hymns all day. She knows what they mean because they have context.

The problem with the music has pushed its way into the debate over architecture. How in the world can we justify taking the tabernacle out of the sanctuary and putting music ministry in? Just who is it we've come to see at this liturgy? As human beings, we are physical creatures. Visible things have significance to us that runs to supernatural things. This is why our Lord instituted a sacramental order.

Architecture should also be sacramental. Yet our Churches no longer employ the genius of Gothic or Baroque or Romanesque structures. Now they have become Calvinist Amphitheatres - edifices stripped of sacred art, tabernacles, permanent altars, marble, stained glass, gold, statuary - any accoutrements that remind us of the glory of God or the tradition of Christendom. New churches are bland and boring, whitewashed and carpeted with the position of prominence given to the priest, while our Lord is put to the side or even out of the room. Anyone who has been to Rome understands the tragedy of this. Who, after spending time in the Vatican, can help but feel a little depressed about the prospect of returning to Christ the King? Why is this beauty not emulated? Rome certainly hasn't torn down St. Peter's to put up a warehouse "worship space." I believe that above all, the placement of our Lord in the tabernacle is of paramount importance to the life of faith in the Church. If Christ is in the center of our lives, he should be in the center of the Church. I want to see him the second I walk in, not have to search through all the closets to find him. The Second Vatican council never suggested that this be otherwise.

I understand that many of these things occur with the best intentions. On the whole, there is no conscious, malicious force under way to destroy the Catholic Experience. But regardless of intention, this IS happening. To dismiss the line of thinking I have expressed as "traditionalist" or as "pre-conciliar" is sheer ignorance. The Church is exactly what I want and need it to be - right now. Again, I point the finger to Rome as the model. What they do, so also we should do. In the end, what it really comes down to is respect for our Eucharistic Lord. He is the cornerstone of the Church, not us. Any movement to feel better about ourselves at the expense of his crucifixion is not Catholic. We need to always evaluate our motives in terms of this respect. Always, we must be certain that what we are doing is in line with the Church, and done out of love for Him. Aquinas said it best in his aforementioned hymn: "Jesus my Lord, my God, my All - How can I love thee as I ought? And how revere this wondrous gift, so far surpassing hope or thought? Sweet sacrament, we thee Adore. Oh, make us love thee more and more. Oh, make us love thee more and more."