

In this seventh article of my series on Eucharistic Adoration, I will draw together some of the themes of the first six in order to show that adoration, prayer, and the Eucharist lie at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic and that reviving these realities in our personal and parish life is essential for the renewal of the Church today.

I will approach this topic by offering some opinions about those who, as St. John says in his first letter, “have gone out from us.” In so doing, however, I will not focus on those who have left the practice of Catholicism through simple neglect or on those who have specific objections to Catholic teachings. Rather, I will react to those who are searching for a spiritual experience which they find absent in Catholicism and more satisfyingly present in other forms of Christianity. These include people of all ages but the young in particular seem most likely to leave us for this reason.

First of all, we must affirm that such people are sincere in their search for a deeper experience of Jesus Christ than they found in their experience of Catholicism. Moreover, we must admit that for many today, the experience of Catholicism in their local parish is dull and boring, characterized by lackluster liturgies and poor preaching. All of this I freely grant.

However, I think that two more fundamental factors are operative here and that these are interwoven in complex ways. The first consists of a misapprehension of the nature and purpose of Christian worship. Under the influence of modern self-centeredness and individualism, many today think that “going to church” should always provide a gratifying emotional lift. This is the basic thrust of the complaint that has been ringing in my ears ever since I began to teach in Catholic schools in the 1970’s: “I don’t get anything out of it.” If I can find another experience that I can “get something out of,” I will simply abandon the Catholic faith as easily as changing my clothes. This other experience may be attendance at a non-Catholic worship service or it may be embracing some other form of “spirituality.”

The second factor, interwoven with the first, consists of a certain failure on the part of the Church in its catechesis and evangelization. I am convinced that most of those who leave us are completely ignorant of the two-thousand-year-old immensely rich heritage of Catholic spirituality. They know nothing of the great saints and mystics who spent their lives seeking close union with Christ, wrote volumes about it, and led countless others into that same intimate union. For complex reasons, we have abandoned this ancient heritage and replaced it with a childish “Jesus loves you” message which becomes trite and repetitive.

Let me summarize those last two paragraphs. The two factors are related in a paradoxical way. First, too many of us are seeking exclusively one aspect of Christian experience. Secondly, too many of us are unaware that a far deeper experience of the kind we desire has long been available in our Catholic heritage. In other words, we can indeed “get something out of it.” And what we can get out of it is far more fulfilling than anything we might find in the non-Catholic worship services that some are attracted to.

Tragically, we have failed to manifest the spiritual depths of Catholicism and we have failed to teach it, failed especially to lead our youth into the rich heritage that is ours.

There are two other important aspects of that sincere spiritual search which cause many to reach outside their Catholic background. These are the search for community or fellowship and the desire for a more contemporary aesthetic experience, particularly a musical one. Again, the desire for these is not in itself wrong. The issue, rather, is the exclusive emphasis on such experiences at the expense of a deeper personal relationship with Christ. Fellowship and music are good but they are not the end. They are but means to the end. The end is Jesus Christ. And again, many of those who have “gone out from us” are not even aware that such a relationship with Christ is at the spiritual heart of traditional Catholic faith.

By the grace of God, our abandonment of Catholic spiritual life can be reversed. Prayer and meditation before the Blessed Sacrament can be an important source of this renewal.

*Look for Article 8: Mass Is Not Enough!*