

DECEMBER 22

O REX GENTIUM

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*O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O
Keystone of the mighty arch of man,
come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.*

In his Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI recalled St. Augustine, who taught that “[believers] strengthen themselves by believing” (*Porta Fidei*, §7). To mark the Church’s Year of Faith (2012–13), I asked the Lord to find a blocked area in my own belief so that he might open it as a door to deeper faith. It did not take long for that area of little faith to be shown to me: Eucharistic adoration.

The first time I experienced Eucharistic adoration was at World Youth Day in Toronto (2002). Our group walked into an expansive yet dimly lit hall with an illuminated stage at its center. In time, I found myself kneeling alongside my companions as a priest in resplendent vestments processed through the space carrying a glistening, radiant monstrance. As he drew near, some around me were overcome with emotion and collapsed to the floor; others wept. I was nervous and more than a little uncomfortable. I wanted to leave.

I never had an urge to go back to adoration. Clearly, it was not for me. I did not want to be overcome, I did not want to weep, and I certainly did not want to feel like I had to. While I did find myself in adoration spaces several times over the next ten years, it was always as part of a retreat or some other such occurrence—it was never because of my own desire. In truth, I rather avoided adoration, even explaining to others that it “just wasn’t part of my spirituality.”

It's not that I did not place my trust in the Eucharist; I just shied away from the devotional practice of adoring the Blessed Sacrament. I knew, however, that entering into deeper communion in the Mass required, in part, an ever-deeper contemplation of Christ's Eucharistic presence. I also knew that the basic posture for faith is always humility, and that the willingness to chance having been wrong in the past unlocks the possibility for growth in the future. I felt drawn to humble myself before my previous conclusions, so I committed to going to Eucharistic adoration for thirty minutes every week during the Year of Faith. Even if I couldn't produce stronger belief on my own, I would at least show up.

Once a week, I walked across Notre Dame's campus to a small chapel where I sat silently before a consecrated Host exposed in a gold monstrance and flanked by half a dozen candles. This quiet little space is remarkably different from that large warehouse in Toronto, except for the gold monstrance and the Host contained within it. I went to sit there weekly, mostly without expectation.

When my eyes were opened and I looked up, the only thing that caught my attention besides the Blessed Sacrament was a tapestry of John baptizing Jesus—a replica of the one in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. This now-familiar image was simply there for me for the first two months of my visits, but after several months, the tapestry either showed me something about Eucharistic adoration that I did not expect, or else the grace of Eucharistic adoration presented the tapestry to me in a new way. In the image, Jesus is kneeling, not John. I began to wonder who was adoring whom.

In Toronto, it seemed all too evident what Eucharistic adoration meant: we were to melt spectacularly into a puddle of emotions and tears before the One held above us. Strangely, though, the Host had been silent, and it only moved as it was moved by the priest.

In the little adoration chapel, there was no show, no spectacle; there was the silence of the Host resting upon the altar. It is the same silence, I suppose, that was at the center of that activity in Toronto, yet here it is more audible. I did not hear it at first, but seeing Jesus kneeling before John tuned my ears, or else confirmed what I was already hearing.

And what does this silence say?

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Well, I first came to sit in silence before this silence because I believed that,

The Lord is God, the mighty God,
 the great king over all the gods,
 He holds in his hands the depths of the earth
 and the highest mountains as well.
 He made the sea; it belongs to him,
 the dry land, too, for it was formed by his hand. (Psalm 95:3–5)

I pray this psalm with the Church every morning. I have come to believe that this is my God, my King, the cornerstone of my life and the joy of my heart, the One who fashioned me from dust. With these words having already become my own in some measure, the silence of the Host could now begin to speak to my heart, to teach me again how mightiness works and what power is for this King whom I praise.

Come, then, let us bow down and worship,
 bending the knee before the Lord, our maker,
 For he is our God and we are his people,
 the flock he shepherds. (Psalm 95:6–7)

I have been sitting before the Almighty who has made himself subject to me—this King who kneels before his subject. The beloved Son who knelt before John now kneels in silence awaiting my blessing. This is not the suspension of his kingship, but its revelation; it is not the absence of his glory, but its manifestation.

To him, I am more than I supposed myself to be. Yet, I am not dignified in my own right, but precisely because he kneels before me. In this is the wondrous exchange in which “eternal life is promised to us by the humility of the Lord, who bowed himself down to our pride” (Augustine, *Confessions* I.9.17). He values us enough to patiently persuade us, rather than swiftly overpower us. He bends down low so that no one will be below his love.

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. (Isaiah 9:5a)

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This Child did not stand for us to fall at his feet; rather, he fell three times to lift us up from our pride. He did not overcome us with his fullness; rather, he wept with us for the sake of our redemption. He did not appoint himself with fine linens so as to elicit our attention; rather, he allowed himself to be stripped, clinging to nothing save the Spirit he would give to us. The One who came as a child did not hold himself up in regal brilliance; rather, he was lifted up in derision, his body battered and bruised.

And this is what I adore: the power that refuses to overwhelm and instead submits to the possibility of my adoration. He adores that possibility, and will not take the freedom he has given me to come and gaze at him. He waits, silently, for “the Father spoke one Word which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul” (John of the Cross, *Maxims on Love*).

Here, then, is the King of all the nations. His reign is the measure of all to whom power has been entrusted, of all principalities that have come or will come, of every creature that has been called into existence (Romans 8:38–39). By his silence, the King of the Blessed Sacrament asks us: *Do you give or do you take? Do you free or do you bind? Do you serve or do you consume? Do you accept or do you refuse?*

Come, let us adore.

