



- ◆ **The Eucharist – The Mystery of Faith**
- ◆ **Survey on What Catholics Believe**
- ◆ **Spiritual Consolation**

The following article by Shemaiah Gonzalez appeared in the *US Catholic* magazine in May 2020.

The first time I attended Mass was on a lunch break at my Protestant seminary. I was working on a master's degree in pastoral studies in Portland, Oregon, and had begun a long-distance relationship with a childhood friend who was a cradle Catholic. Sneaking away from campus between classes, I walked into the small chapel at the Grotto. I wanted to glimpse this man's faith to determine whether we were compatible.

How can I explain what I found there at that lunchtime Mass? The quiet I had not heard in such a long time—or maybe ever. I witnessed tenderness between the handful of people who were there that dusky fall day. Each was at least 50 years older than me. I saw an intimacy that comes with praying together, but it was more than that. I felt the connection they had, not only to each other but also to a sacred history I could not yet name. I remember how cold I felt. I could not keep myself from shaking. I feel this chill now as I remember that day. I know now that it is, as it was then, the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I kept returning on my lunch breaks, on weekend visits with my boyfriend, and on holy days. Each time I was armed with questions and defenses of why I shouldn't be there. But the answer kept returning: God is here.

I don't want to disparage my Protestant roots, especially as #Exvangelical seems to be the trend these days. Protestants are my brothers and sisters in Christ. I love them dearly. This background gave me a firm biblical foundation—strong enough to be able to point out to my now fellow Catholics that they do in fact know their Bible, they just can't tell you the book and chapter to find the verse in. This foundation is strong enough that I realize I still don't know anything.

I continued attending Mass (even without being able to take the Eucharist), graduated from seminary, and married the man (in a Catholic Mass). Yet it took six years from that first Mass at the Grotto until I finally converted. Oddly, what held me back is the very thing I now hold onto and what keeps me Catholic—real presence.

I wasn't certain I could believe in real presence or transubstantiation, that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist. It turns out I am not alone. In a Pew survey last year, only one third of Catholics believe in real presence. Real presence is what makes my life as a Catholic different from the years I spent in Protestantism, where bread and wine are symbols. Bread and wine are taken in remembrance and to look forward, but not revered in the mystical moment of now.

I understand now, after more than a decade in the church, that this is the mystery of our faith—the very words spoken during Mass to remind us. Real presence is the very core, crux, and heart of this faith.

When I receive the Eucharist, Christ is present. I connect to God and receive grace in that moment in a singular, particular way that is unique to me. I am in communion with God. The “restless heart” that St. Augustine speaks of is held still for one quiet moment.

As if this wasn't the most magnificent moment in my life (and I get to experience it every week, every day if I want to), it is even more expansive. In the moment of the Eucharist, I also connect to and am in communion with my fellow parishioners. Some I have celebrated and grieved with over the years. Others I do not know by name but know their presence, their routine as they arrive at Mass, and the red sweater they always wear for Pentecost. In the moment of the Eucharist, I connect to them in a more qualitative way than when we walked through the doors of the church.

There is also a connection to the church as a whole. I pray with the grandmother whispering over candles in a small village church in Italy, with the families in China living under persecution, and with the Nigerian seminarian moments before he was martyred.

There is a sense in which the Eucharist is timeless, out of time, eternal, or, as I recently read, a panorama of salvation history. We look to the past, remembering Christ's resurrection. We look at the present, our relationship with him now. We look to the future, his second coming. As we look back in this moment, we also connect to the faithful who have come before us: the apostles, saints, and our eighth-grade math teacher who prayed over the class roster.

As we look forward into the future, we see Christ's second coming, the feast of the marriage supper of the lamb. We see when all creation will be reconciled, when all will be made new, when sin no longer separates us from experiencing God fully. Our existence will not be this glimpse of heaven but will be heaven.

Everything about being Catholic is centered on this one moment when we experience the real presence in the Eucharist. When Christ is present in the Eucharist, I connect to God, my church, and the entire panorama of salvation in a more qualitative way than I do the rest of the week. The ache I feel in the rest of my life—for God, for connection, for community, for cleanness, for wholeness—vanishes in one single moment. It is a flash, and I'll miss it if I'm not present.

I now know what I found at that lunchtime Mass more than 20 years ago. I could not yet experience it fully and still have only had a taste. Real presence. God is here. This is home.

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The following essay by Editorial Assistant Rene Ostberg and survey were in the May 2020 *US Catholic* magazine.

In 1979 *U.S. Catholic* ran an essay titled “It makes a difference whether you’re Catholic” and asked readers to tell us what being Catholic means to them. In 2010 we asked readers to chime in once more with their opinions about Catholic faith and identity. Ten years on, we’ve asked the question again: What does it mean to be Catholic?

In today’s world of shrinking congregations, multiple clergy sex abuse scandals, and a growing population of young people who identify as having no religion, does it still make a difference whether you’re Catholic?

More than 400 people responded to our survey, 85 percent of whom say they identify as cradle Catholics, and 17 percent of whom say they converted to Catholicism as a teenager or adult.

Among those who converted is Shemaiah Gonzalez of Seattle, who wrote the essay “For this Catholic, real presence is the heart of Catholicism.” Raised a Protestant, Gonzalez says that what held her back from converting initially became the very thing that keeps her Catholic now: real presence. “Everything about being Catholic is centered on this one moment,” she writes. “The moment of real presence in the Eucharist.”

The majority of survey respondents agree with Gonzalez, as 82 percent chose “participating in the sacraments” when asked what it means to be a good Catholic. And yet with 78 percent of respondents choosing “going to Mass regularly” and 76 percent choosing “advocating for peace and social justice,” plus many respondents writing in dozens of other answers, it’s clear there is no dogmatic consensus among *U.S. Catholic*’s readers.

The sacraments and the liturgy were tied as respondents’ favorite thing about being Catholic at 69 percent, with the social justice tradition coming in a close second at 64 percent.

When it came to the question of what makes being Catholic unique, while many respondents again named the sacraments—specifically, the Eucharist—a few claimed we Catholics aren’t so special after all, such as Ron Hoverstad of Stockton, California, who says, “Our core beliefs are shared to some extent by many faith traditions.”

But some offered a more appreciative and optimistic view of our Catholic faith, such as Sister Phyllis Jaszowski of Portland, Oregon, who says, “What makes being Catholic unique is that the church changes with the times. Not always immediately, but it does change. The church points the way to God. It is a map and not the final end.”

And the survey says.....

1. Being Catholic is the most important part of my identity.

Agree 73%
Disagree 27%

2. I think that it makes a difference whether you’re Catholic.

Agree 67%
Disagree 33%

3. I’m a cradle Catholic.

Agree 85%
Disagree 15%

4. I converted to the Catholic faith as an adult or teenager.

Agree 17%
Disagree 83%

5. My viewpoints align with most of the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

Agree 74%
Disagree 26%

6. I attended Catholic school and/or a Catholic college or university.

Agree 74%
Disagree 26%

7. To be a good Catholic means:

82% Participating in the sacraments
78% Going to Mass regularly
76% Advocating for peace and social justice
66% Being baptized in the Catholic Church
44% Going to confession at least once a year

8. For me, the best part about being Catholic is:

69% The sacraments
69% The liturgy
64% The social justice tradition
55% The fact that it is a truly global church
52% The fact that the church can trace its beginnings to Jesus Christ

9. I was married or would get married in a Catholic ceremony, if I were to be married.

Agree 90%
Disagree 10%

10. I raised or would raise my children as Catholics.

Agree 95%
Disagree 5%

Results are based on survey responses from 401 USCatholic.org visitors.

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The follow article appeared in *The Sacred Heart Messenger*, an Irish magazine published by Irish Jesuits. This article is by Fr. Brendan McManus SJ. It reflects on the movement of consolation in the prayer guidance of St. Ignatius of Loyola whose feast day is on July 31st.

Is sounds like a simple word of encouragement, 'look on the bright side', or 'keep your hearts up', but it is much more than that.

The word 'consolation' is a technical term from the Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius. It is often translated as a felt sense of God's presence, a sense of light and life, but that is only one of its meanings. It also means to move towards an increase of faith, hope and love, and to act against 'desolation' (dryness and emptiness) or being taken to dark and isolating places.

Paradoxically you can be going through a difficult time, grieving or acting against injustice, and be in consolation as you know you are doing the right thing. Equally, you can feel great temporarily escaping from your responsibilities but be in desolation, that is, not really dealing with things. The key to it is recognizing the deeper feelings (peace/rightness), not the superficial ones (enjoyment/distaste) inside yourself and which direction you are travelling, towards the light (personal growth, serving others and experiencing genuine happiness) or away from it.

A helpful metaphor to capture it is that of navigating or walking a mountain trail. Getting lost is a common occurrence but not if you know how to use a compass or GPS and navigate. Because we are created by God we have an inbuilt ongoing communication. We all have an inbuilt 'compass' or orientation towards the good (God) and also can identify with the sense of unease of getting off track. We have to learn how to read this compass accurately, through being tuned in to our inner moods and feelings, and obviously have to act on this information to orient ourselves.

This process is often summarized as: take stock of where you are (see), work out where you need to be, where the track is (judge) and get back on the trail (act). Getting lost is a common experience for many of us, so let's not beat ourselves up about it, but

concentrate on how to quickly get back on the right road.

The problem is that we have to adapt to changing circumstances all the time and what worked on one occasion, doesn't necessarily work again. For example, sometimes if I am lost I need to stop, get my bearings and maybe even go back to where I recognize. At other times I need to act fast to avoid danger, falling in a stream or being out in a storm. It all depends on the circumstances as to what the best thing to do is.

Sometimes I need to respond with compassion and kindness to people, but sometimes I need to be assertive and strong; reading the situation accurately dictates how I should respond and doing 'what I always do' won't always work. There is no one hard and fast rule but rather lots of 'rules of thumb' such as be aware, don't make hasty decisions, work out what your options are.

Consolation is essentially about the direction of travel or being on track. Is something bringing me towards God or away from God; towards life, people and connection, or into isolation, rumination and withdrawal? The key question when facing difficulty is always 'what do I need to do to get back on track?'

Therefore, when Pope Francis says 'stay in consolation', he means keep your 'compass' working well through prayer and reflection; don't be naïve about the challenges you face, but be adaptable and nimble on your feet, and recognize the greatest trap of all is feeling that you are totally lost, that God has abandoned you. the 'inner compass' always indicates the right direction.

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Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sean

tobin2@live.com

