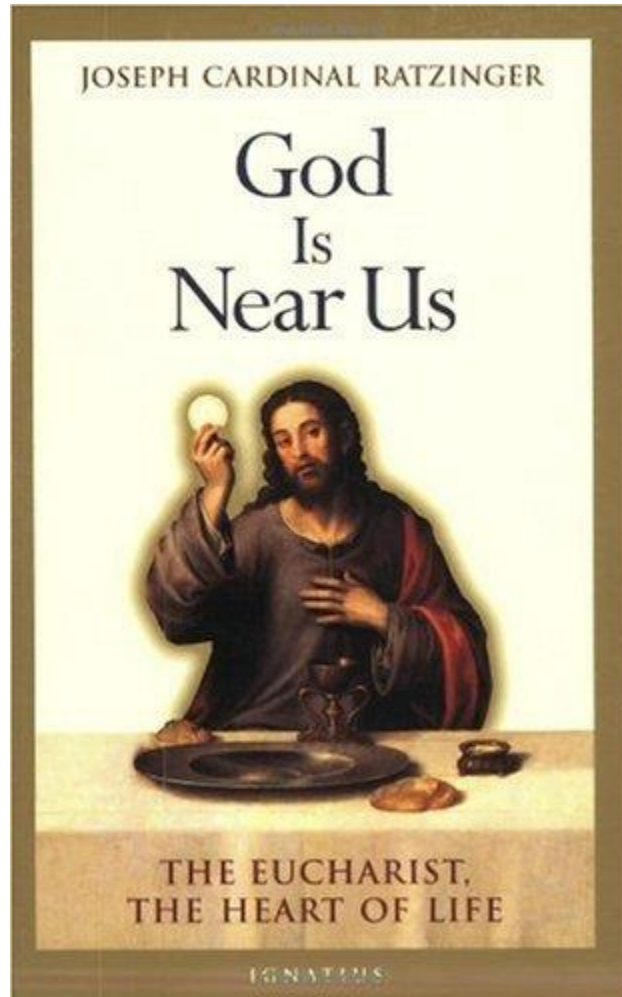


For A Summary of “God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life” by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)



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About the Author

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, was born on Holy Saturday (16 April) in 1927 at Marktl am Inn, Germany. His youth was spent in Traunstein, near Austria, and his father worked as a policeman in the Bavarian town. As he was growing up, he witnessed the rise of Nazis in Germany, and in the face of such events, he became rooted in the faith of his family, in the Catholic Church. He studied philosophy and theology in Freising and Munich, and on 29 June 1951, he was ordained into the priesthood. After a year, he began teaching in Freising, and earned a doctorate and began to teach in universities in Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg. He contributed to the Second Vatican Council, as an expert advising Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne. In 1977, Pope Paul VI named him bishop of Munich and Freising, and later that year, he was made a cardinal. He participated in three Conclaves, was named to many significant positions in the Church, most notably Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (by John Paul II in 1981) and Dean of the College of Cardinals (elected with John Paul II's consent in 2002.) April 19, 2005, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was elected as Supreme Pontiff, taking the name Benedict XVI.

General Overview

This work is a collection of homilies, addresses, and meditations of the Holy Father (then Cardinal Ratzinger) on the Eucharist. He looks to the Eucharist as not only the heart of the Church, but also the heart of life. The Eucharist is recognized as an essential part of the Creed that we profess, the wellspring of the Sacraments, and the transforming power in the life of every person and of the living Church. The Holy Father demonstrates that it is the Eucharist that gives meaning to the death of Christ. It is the Eucharist that challenges and unites hearts. It is the Eucharist that elucidates the redemption of Creation by the Creator. And it is the Eucharist that leads us to faith in eternal life and shows us the way.

Chapter 1: God With Us and God Among Us

This chapter begins with a look at the Nicene Creed, as a profession of faith in a living, self-revealed, self-defined God. This self-revelation has come about through establishing a relationship with us, and it is in this relationship that the world has been granted direct contact with our God. Rightly so, the Incarnation stands at the center of the Creed; this is where then-Cardinal Ratzinger focuses this meditation. “By the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary.”

The first part of this reflection upon the Incarnation enters into the semantics of the Incarnation clause, itself. Within this one sentence, we find great truths about God. The triune nature of God may not appear clearly at first, as it seems that only the Holy Spirit and the Son are mentioned, but the Father is inseparable from the Son, as is stated earlier in the Creed (“One in being with the Father”). What is more important, says Cardinal Ratzinger, is what the action of the sentence reveals of our God. In taking the passive voice (“born of the Virgin Mary”), it is clear that the Incarnation required the “yes” of the Virgin. The salvation of mankind is not merely *ex machina Dei*; it comes from God but is not thrust upon an unwilling mankind. It is made possible by the full gift of Mary. This is a God living for and with us.

The author then turns to examine the sentence in light of Scriptural background to help draw out the profundity of the central passage of the Creed. The Gospel of Matthew, written to a Jewish community, places Joseph in the foreground in order to demonstrate the continuity of the Covenant with Israel and the Davidic line. The Incarnation has not caused a rift for Jews, but rather fulfilled the promise made to them. But, the author is quick to note, this does not give rise to the exclusion of the Gentiles. Through the Virgin Mary, the prophesy of Isaiah is fulfilled, but in adapting that prophesy to “*They shall call him Emmanuel,*” Matthew opens the door for all nations to be saved. Luke’s account of the Annunciation shows the role of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant between God and man, and we see once more that Mary’s “yes” was necessary for this salvation (albeit only through grace could such a “yes” have been uttered.) Finally, the prologue of John’s Gospel offers

notions of God that may seem otherwise unthinkable: “The Word was made flesh and pitched His tent among us.” Here is a God humbled to take the form of man and even further humbled to take on the outward appearance of bread. He has given Himself to new birth, and that new birth to the service of God is at the heart of Christianity. Christ is the wellspring of our new life as Christians, and it is in and through Mary, and now the Church, that Christ has found a place among us to bring us to new life.

Chapter 2: God’s Yes and His Love Are Maintained Even in Death

If we attempt to fit Christ into a common mold, that of God or man, His death becomes senseless; either He went through unnecessary suffering to save man, or He was simply a man whose death signified nothing. We must look to the witnesses of faith to get to know the real Jesus who died on the Cross for the salvation of man. In these witnesses, we see not only the death of Christ; we see His path to the Cross. In anticipation of His death, Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and the author emphasizes the interdependence of the Eucharist and the death of Christ. Without His death, the words of the Eucharist would be an unfulfilled promise, and without the life-giving power of the Eucharist, the death of Jesus would be without a point.

Then-Cardinal Ratzinger examines this notion in light of the Gospel of John. The message and meaning of Christ’s life can be found in the Last Supper, in the washing of His disciples’ feet. He came as a slave to cleanse us, to prepare us for the love of the Father and for loving one another. Here we find two figures that put barriers between themselves and that cleansing. Judas exemplifies the vainglory that we often find obstructing our relationship with God; while Peter demonstrates a false piety that refuses to open oneself up to the mercy of God. It is humility that is required of us, the humility to accept the help and healing of Christ.

We go on to read about the specific words of the Last Supper, looking for the root and meaning of the words that would become the Eucharistic prayer. In uttering, “This is my Body, this is my Blood,” Christ uses the language of Temple sacrifice and makes clear that He is the ultimate sacrifice; it is in Christ that all of the sacrifices and efforts of the Old Testament are brought to their fullness. In adding, “(my Body) which is given up for you... (my Blood) which is shed for many,” Christ offers His suffering as a sacrifice for all to God. (Here, there is discussion of whether “for many” or “for all” is an appropriate translation. Both are found in Scripture, and neither can be understood correctly without the other; Christ’s death brought about the salvation of all men, but in our freedom, we are still free to refuse to accept it.) A final point of interest in the words of the Last Supper is “This is the *new covenant* in my blood,” which directs us to the words of Jeremiah, extending the covenant beyond the descendants of Abraham to the rest of humanity.

All of this is very interesting, if not meaningless, if the death and Resurrection of Christ never occurred. Without the Resurrection, these are promises unfulfilled. But the death and Resurrection did occur, and the suffering of Christ offers hope for the suffering of the Church.

Chapter 3: The Wellspring of Life From the Side of the Lord, Opened in Loving Sacrifice

Looking to John’s Passion narrative, we can see the message of Christ demonstrated in the beginning and end of His Passion; in the washing of the feet and in the opening of His side. St. John makes it clear that Christ is the new Paschal Lamb, and from His self-sacrifice come the blood and water. As Eve came forth from the side of Adam (John uses the same word here), the Eucharist and baptism come forth from the side of Jesus. From the side of the Crucified Jesus come the Church and the Sacraments. Again, the author directs us to see the inseparable nature of the death and the Resurrection of Christ. The Eucharist, as the presentation of the sacrifice on the Cross, answers the ultimate question of death.

This raises the question of what this sacrificial notion says of our God and us. Does this not bring about an image of an angry God that we must appease? And how can we as human beings offer anything of value to our

God? The first question is answered in recognizing that God has given Himself to us. It cannot be a question of appeasing an angry God, as this self-giving is clearly an act of love for mankind. It is God who has extended His hand to us. He has given that we may give.

The second concern may seem more complex in light of this. If God has given that we may give, and we offer a sacrifice to Him, are we not just pawns used unwittingly by God? Here, the author looks back to the psalmists to find the beginning of a notion that the sacrifice pleasing to God is the prayer and praise of one who is pleasing to God. Probing further into the Jewish context of Christ's life, we find that the institution of the Eucharist is woven into the central prayer and offering of Judaism, the Passover *Haggadah*. Within the central prayer, Christ has verbalized His self-sacrifice. The Eucharistic prayer is the continuation, even the completion, of the Passover *Haggadah*, and in verbalizing His sacrifice for the Church to repeat, Christ has allowed us to join in His sacrifice. It is in the Mass as a sacrifice that we are can see the glory of Christ.

Here, attention is shifted to focus more specifically on the Eucharist. In each celebration of the Eucharist the one Christ is wholly and fully present. So, in offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist, we offer the same sacrifice as others do around the world. We are in communion not only with the one Christ, but also with the *one* Church (as signified by the inclusion of the Pope and bishops in the Eucharistic prayer.) We are brought together with the Church of the present and the Church of the past. We are brought together with our fellow man, which we must remember in approaching the Sacrament. This last note, however, may lead us to the issue of intercommunion, against which the author strongly warns. The Eucharist is demonstrative of our unity, and we must patiently and humbly pray for the day when we are once more united in and by God, rather than use the Eucharist as a means of creating a false sense of unity.

Chapter 4: Banquet of the Reconciled – Feast of the Resurrection

The Mass and liturgical reform have come under two pressures or opposing criticisms within the Church. Some suggest that the Mass has become too ritualized, and a more simple form is required. Others find that such a sentiment in reform has de-sacralized the Mass and created a puritanical, iconoclastic mass, only outside of which can the Eucharist be validly celebrated. In response to this, the author takes the reader through the development of the Mass.

The first issue addressed is the true nature of the Eucharist, citing two opinions that can be found among biblical scholars. These are a) that the Eucharist developed out of Jesus meals with sinners or b) that the Eucharist developed out of His daily meals with His disciples. Both of these possibilities do not truly hold water. In adopting the first suggestion, that the Eucharist came from Christ dining with sinners, some attempt to justify the notion that the Eucharist is for sinners, as a means of reconciliation. Therefore, receiving the Eucharist is independent of one's state or even of baptism. This first fails to account for the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and then misplaces reconciliation. The author says that the Eucharist is not the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but of the *reconciled*, we who are still weak, but are yet one with Christ. The second assertion that the Eucharist came out of Christ's daily fellowship meals with His disciples is erroneous, as well. We know that the Eucharist was celebrated only on Sundays in the early Christian community; it was something set apart from the daily fellowship meals of the community. It was the celebration of the Resurrection on the first day of the week. Without the element of the Resurrection, this is no more than a meal shared by the community; it negates the Resurrection as the turning point for human history.

As the early community was comprised of practicing Jews, they went to the synagogue to worship with their fellow Jews. They listened to Holy Scripture and sang the psalms. But they could not participate in the sacrifice of the Temple, as Christ was the final sacrifice. The curtain of the Temple was torn, and thus, the Eucharist was separated from the liturgy of the word. The community did, however, read the Scriptures as the word of Christ for Christ, and this reading was not accepted by Israel. So, the liturgy of the word was forced out of the Temple, and the two liturgies came together. The Canon developed out of Jewish prayer, but in

moving from Judaism, it did not move away from its origins; rather, it developed to its fruition. And its sublimity should be exempt from arbitrary change by any particular priest or congregation.

The focus moves to three areas of confusion within the reform of the Mass: the offertory, the reception of Communion, and the use of the vernacular. It has been said that the offertory has lost its sacrificial nature in the hymns now sung, but it is pointed out that the nature of the offertory is not sacrificial. The offertory is the preparation for the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist. In this sense, the Mass mirrors the life of Christ; we begin by hearing of His life in Nazareth, etc., we prepare for His sacrifice, and we celebrate His death and Resurrection in the Eucharist. The second controversy is that over reception of communion: should it be done standing or kneeling? By hand or directly by mouth? The point is made that the above are acceptable practices, citing the early Church up to the 9th Century receiving the Eucharist in the hand while standing. Not only that, but receiving the Eucharist in the hand demonstrates the extent of God's love, to lower himself to reside on our hand. Additionally, it is not so much the issue of our external cleanliness (as can be an argument for reception on the tongue), but an issue of our internal approach to the Sacrament. (How much more do we sin with our tongue than our hands?) Finally, the issue of the language used in the Mass must be addressed. While it is true that the Latin language is one of beauty, expressing the catholicity of the Church, at the heart of the matter is the necessity to have a comprehensible Mass to which people can listen and respond. With all of this in mind, we should seek above all else the understanding of the heart, the transforming nature of the Mass.

Chapter 5: The Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament

St. Thomas Aquinas reflected on the incredible fact that God is near us on earth in the Eucharist. But we often find it difficult to accept this nearness of God, and barriers are put up to obstruct the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Three major concerns in this regard are a) is the True Presence supported Biblically, b) is the universality of the Eucharist possible for "a body" and c) does the change of Transubstantiation really occur?

Specifically, in the Gospel of John, Christ loses many followers by insisting that one "must eat of the Son of Man..." Had this been a figurative matter, He could easily have said so and retained His following, but not such effort was made. In eating this bread, we are drawn further into the Body of Christ, in Him with Him and through Him.

Looking to the question of the possibility of one body being shared time and time again, we must first recognize the limitations of our intellect imposed by death. Bearing this in mind, an attempt has been made to elucidate the question. The fundamental issue is that of the word "body" as used within Scripture. It is not purely that of one's physical nature, but it also includes the inseparable spirit, which is what is shared between people and between Christ and His people. We receive the resurrected Christ personally and share in His self-sacrifice for humanity. We should only receive Christ with preparation to make us aware of this fact, and we should recognize that never does love entail possessing someone only for ourselves.

Finally, the question of Transubstantiation appears to be quickly disproved by science. It is true that the appearance remains the same, but there is a profound change, a change of the substance. The essence of this bread and wine is raised to a new level. We are receiving Christ, in something new that Christ is doing each time, and we must recognize that this is not a gift that lasts but half an hour; rather, it is an on-going action of the salvation of man. In the reception of Christ's body, we are called to give God ourselves bodily, in song, speech, silence, standing, and kneeling in homage. The Bodily Presence demands our adoration.

Chapter 6: The Immediacy of the Presence of the Lord Carried into Everyday Life

This homily on Maundy Thursday addresses the priesthood on the topic of Eucharistic Adoration. In Adoration, we find the heart of the Sacrament of the Eucharist – we find a sacrifice of self-giving that unites mankind. It is not a separate act, but rather the extension of the same act beyond the Mass. It is a personal

Communion, the unity of the universal and special priesthods. In Adoration, our consciences are sensitized to recognize our role in the suffering of Christ and the condescension of God in becoming man. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is the environment of the Church and root of her authority. The homilist then focuses on the sacred nature of the Eucharist. Through Christ's death was the Temple curtain torn, but through the Eucharist are ordinary things made holy. Therefore, as humans elevated by Christ, our social nature demands that we show our reverence to this Sacrament that confers holiness on the profane.

Chapter 7: The Lord is Near Us in Our Conscience, in His Word, in His Personal Presence in the Eucharist

This chapter begins by expressing to us that God is near us, especially in the Eucharistic Presence. He is fully present, and our churches remain alive outside of the celebration of the Mass by the fact that we know that He is fully present throughout the day in the Eucharistic presence. Bearing the closeness of God in mind, it is clear that the "Sunday obligation" of Mass is not a burden, but a blessing. We are called to hear the Word of God and receive Him in the Eucharist in the context of the Mass; it is a matter of royal invitation. The Word and the Law are not a burden. The Jews found that receiving the Law unraveled many of life's mysteries, and therefore, their God was very close to them. We should then rejoice in the God who has called us to hear His Word and receive Him physically. Finally, the point is made that in these things, we are not called to something entirely new. Instead, the nearness of God has taken us back to our origin; our conscience is more articulated. Less and less is it obscured by the world, as the Lord brings us back to obedience to our conscience – that is, praise and thankfulness to God.

Chapter 8: Standing before the Lord, Walking with the Lord, Kneeling before the Lord

In an address given on the feast of Corpus Christi, the author inspects the three statures traditionally found in worship on the feast (standing, walking, and kneeling) to tease-out what these signify in our relationship with the Risen Lord. In the tradition of *statio*, one can find that we stand before God as people united by the one Bread, in the one Body of Christ. In standing before God, one becomes more understanding toward our fellow men. In the *processio*, one walks with others following the Lord. He, the Bread and the Word, is our right goal, and without such a goal, forward movement is far from progress. Finally, in Adoration we kneel down before the Lord. The author makes a point to show that this is not the subjugation of our freedom, but rather the fullness of our freedom to bow down before the Lord, who bowed down Himself to serve and save us.

Chapter 9: We Who Are Many Are One Body, One Bread

This brief meditation on the words of 1 Corinthians 10:17 puts particular focus on the unifying aspect of the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that Christians are united in Christ's own Body, and the Church is this Eucharistic fellowship, ever renewing itself in Christ.

Chapter 10: Peace from the Lord

This meditation offers a look at the priestly ministry as one of peace. It is on one level a worldly peace, as should be expected of all Christians. On another level, the priestly ministry offers the Eucharist, referred to as "peace" by the early Christians. It is not only the promise of future peace; it is the inner peace of Christ and the outward peace of table fellowship that disregarded class and race.

Chapter 11: A Church of All Times and Places

In this chapter, we see then-Cardinal Ratzinger look to the essence of Catholicism in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a sacrifice of Christ who is indivisible. Therefore, the Eucharist is only rightly celebrated with the whole Church, which is done through the inclusion of the Pope in the Eucharistic prayer. Communion with Him is Communion with the whole Church of all times, and it is this is where we believe and pray rightly.

Chapter 12: The Church Subsists as Liturgy and in the Liturgy

This homily looks to the Acts of the Apostles for guidance on the role of the priest within the Church. The Church offers meaning for man and a goal for Creation. Just as the early Christians devoted themselves to the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers,” so too must the priestly ministry be directed.

The priest brings forth news of the gospel, the *evangelium*, which is an imperial message. It is not a mere message of joy that affirms our comfortable lives. It may be that it is a message that shakes us from our comfort, but ultimately yields salvation. The homilist also notes that this is placed in the context of the teaching of the apostles, not solely in reading of the gospels. The Word is not a matter of private ownership, but belongs in the context of the Church. Only in the context of a living Church is the text kept from decline or twisting by clever minds.

Looking to Sacrament, it is clear that the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. In the breaking of the bread, man cannot help but be challenged and transformed. In seeking Him humbly and patiently, one will find the Lord leading him in the way of salvation. It is in this sense that we find meaning in the Eucharist for our daily lives; we must give fully of ourselves, as Christ gives Himself to us in the Eucharist. That is true communion with others.

Finally, the homilist turns to the prayer of the early Church that was shared with the other Jews in the Temple, the recitation of the Psalms. In this prayer, they were a living Church, being ever renewed. From these origins of the breviary one finds the necessity to pray the breviary and let it breathe in one’s life, to be ever renewed and led by prayer.

Chapter 13: My Joy Is to Be in Thy Presence

In this final meditation the question of eternal life is addressed. First, it is noted that many people doubt that eternal life is a reality, as a result of the loss of the sense that God is an active agent in the world. Eternal life is the personal conclusion of the reality of an active, eternal God. As one moves further from this active God, one loses more and more this notion of an eternal life, but it is hardly true that one can accept a notion of a life with definitive end. (After all, virtually every world religion has dealt with different forms of theistic or non-theistic eternal life, and now we see some of these non-theistic notions return but without the moral element they once entailed.) The issue may be that the world has stripped itself so much of beauty, truth, and joy that we do not have the aids to properly imagine eternal life, yielding an eternal life of boredom.

This, however, is a troublesome view of eternal life. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger offers the notion that eternal life is not a mere continuation of this life in a series of endless moments to be filled for fear of boredom. Eternal life is an elevated state of life in which moments flow into the “now” of life. This takes eternal life out of the reality of chronology and allows for some sense of eternal life within one’s earthly existence, albeit incomplete. This eternal life is a state of supplication to God, recognizing the fullness of life lived for God alone, despite the confusion and mockery presented by the world. Eternal life is belonging to Christ, in living and dying.

If this eternal life is a way of living, it is clear that it cannot be presumed to be an isolated relationship with God; rather, we live in fellowship with all those who have accepted the love of God in this way. Eternal life is

a matter of society. Modernism has taught us to hope futilely in a utopia that we can build without God, but it is one that is always close but never can be attained. The Kingdom of God, however, is the eternal life that we live when we do the will of God. This has been made possible by the Incarnation, which bridged the gap between mankind and God; God was brought from a distance to surrounding us with His love.

Finally, time is devoted to Christian eschatology. At the end of our temporal lives, it must come to pass that we are judged by the standard of Christ, the Incarnate and Risen Lord. We not only are judged, but we come to understand the wounds of Christ, His suffering, death and love. It is necessary, according to the author, that all which cannot be tolerated within heaven will be burned from us in purifying flames, to make us acceptable for heaven. It is then noted that the soul, the interweaving of body and spirit in mankind, finds itself not disembodied at the end of temporal life, as the notion of a soul without a body is unthinkable. The soul finds its body within the Body of Christ, until the end of time, when all of Creation is redeemed to God. We seek this eternal life, that we may not lose sight of our loving and redeeming God.