

Vatican tries to revive eucharistic adoration

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

For seven centuries, eucharistic adoration—praying before an exposed consecrated communion host—was one of the most popular forms of devotion in the Roman Catholic Church, the focus of beloved prayers and hymns and a distinctive symbol of Catholic identity.

Following the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the practice fell from favor, especially in Europe and the U.S. But over the last decade, under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the church has strongly encouraged a revival of the practice.

"No one eat this flesh, if he has not adored it before; for we sin if we do not adore," Benedict said, quoting St. Augustine in a 2009 speech at the Vatican.

In June, the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome hosted an academic conference on eucharistic adoration at which the speakers, including six prominent cardinals, focused on the rediscovery of the practice.

However, some theologians object to adoration as outdated and unnecessary, warning that it can lead to misunderstandings and undo decades of progress in educating lay Catholics on the meaning of the sacrament.

Eucharistic adoration by the laity originated in the 13th century as a substitute for receiving communion at mass, said Monsignor Kevin W. Irwin, dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America.

At the same time, he said, the church often encouraged a believer's sense of "personal unworthiness" to receive the sacrament—which Catholics believe to be the body of Christ—so many resorted to so-called ocular communion instead.

Eucharistic

adoration was also used as a teaching tool to reaffirm the doctrine of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist, said Richard P. McBrien, a noted theologian at the University of Notre Dame. For instance, McBrien said, devotion grew during the 16th- and 17th-century Counter-Reformation, in response to the arguments of some Protestant Reformers that the Eucharist was merely a symbol, not the actual body of Christ.

In the days when priests celebrated mass in Latin with minimal participation by the congregation, the hymns and prayers associated with adoration gave lay Catholics an opportunity for public worship, Irwin said.

Liturgical reforms after Vatican II greatly increased the laity's participation at mass, which Irwin said satisfied the "felt need for participation in public prayer." Irwin called that an "underlying reason" for the practice's decline.

In 2005, according to Vatican statistics, there were about 2,500 chapels around the world—including 1,100 in the U.S.—that offered so-called perpetual round-the-clock adoration.

Irwin also noted adoration's appeal to a growing number of divorced and remarried Catholics, who are forbidden to receive communion but may participate in adoration. In addition, parishes that lack full-time priests are able to offer adoration as a form of communal worship in lieu of mass.

McBrien acknowledged that some Catholics find adoration "spiritually enriching," but many liturgists, he said, see it as a "step back into the Middle Ages."

According

to McBrien, adoration distorts the meaning of the Eucharist: "It erodes the communal aspect, and it erodes the fact that the Eucharist is a meal. Holy Communion is something to be eaten, not to be adored." For that reason, McBrien said, the practice should be "tolerated but not encouraged." —RNS