

# Letters to a Young Catholic: How to Be Eucharistic, Part 2

Dear Friend,

Do you want to really live?

If you were to ask me that question, I would instinctively respond, “Yes, of course I want to really live.” But if I examine my heart and mind, I am not sure that is actually true. Much of the time what I really want is to be comfortable, rewarded, approved of or untroubled. Do I want to *really* live? A lot of times I actually just want to get by.

In the actual world where being truly present to someone for a [genuine encounter](#) requires the work of preparation and discipline on our part, we shrink from wanting to really live. We settle for something easier. [The first part of how to be Eucharistic](#) was about pushing back against that tendency and learning to prepare well to receive the Lord in the Eucharist. We become Eucharistic by preparing well to encounter the Lord.

[Read more from the Letters to a Young Catholic series here.](#)

Likewise, in the actual world, when really living requires commitment, a change of priorities, acting for the well-being of others, or getting our hands dirty in any number of ways, our desire to really live quickly dulls. Follow-through is hard, and it is costly. The second part of how to be Eucharistic, then, is about letting what – *who* – we receive in the Eucharist to actually change us. St. Augustine described this as “becoming what you receive,” but here I will talk about it as “translation.” We translate the life we receive into our own life.

## Learning to dance

During a retreat I once attended, I talked with a Trappist monk, Father Matthew Kelty. He had been a worldly man, a man of letters, and a man steeped in New England culture prior to entering the monastery. So I asked him, "What was it like for *you* to enter the monastery?"

Father Kelty responded: "Well, the first thing is you just have to learn how to do everything. You have to learn how and when to eat, how and when to sleep, how and when to pray, how and when to work. There are all these steps in monastic life that you just don't know, and it takes a whole year before you feel like you are starting to get it all."

He stopped speaking, and a bit of silence followed. Eventually, I said: "So then what? What happens after a year?"

His eyes sparkled with mirth as he responded, "Well, baby, then it's time to dance."

When this very worldly man, who had all these very strong and well-rehearsed habits, entered the monastery, he was not at all accustomed to the ways of this new place. He was used to eating and speaking and acting a different way; that other way was comfortable to him. When he entered into this new environment, he had to learn and learn and learn. It was not an easy fit, especially not at first. But what was the point of it all? As Father Kelty says, the point is to make this way of life his own. *He* had to dance.

St. Benedict of Nursia – the founder of monasticism in the West – talked about just this sort of thing in the beginning of his "Rule" for those who enter this Christian way of life. He begins by writing, "Listen carefully to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." It is the master – the Lord – who speaks first, and our first duty is to listen and receive him. Soon thereafter, Benedict

writes what this deep listening and receiving is really all about: "The Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings."

Father Kelty takes on new rhythms and habits, and he calls it "dancing," while St. Benedict talks about hearing the Lord and translating his words into action. What does this have to do with the Eucharist? The Eucharist is the gift and the way of giving that we only fully receive when we allow this gift and giving to change us.

## **The Lord who gives**

What does Christ give in the Eucharist? The simple answer: everything. He holds nothing back. To his apostles gathered in the upper room, and to everyone who comes to receive from the altar today, he says, "This is my body ... this is my blood ... given for you."

This is no mere gesture. He backs up what he says by doing it. He gives his body upon the cross; he gives his blood for us.

In his own words, Jesus explains the meaning of his death. His death is an offering. Whose offering? It is the Father's offering – his Father in heaven who gave his only Son for the life of the world. Jesus knew this, for as he told Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). The body and blood of Jesus are the Father's pledge and gift of love for the sake of a world. The Father gives everything.

This offering is not the Father's only; this is also fully Jesus' offering: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own" (Jn 10:18). He gives his body and his blood: "given for you," he tells his disciples. Between the Father and the Son, there is a communion of giving.



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Rather than participate in this communion of giving, others took Jesus by force. Jesus' body and blood are God's offer of love at the very same time that the world takes and does what it wants with that body; the world sheds that blood for its own purposes. Think about how peculiar this all is: Just when the Father and Son make this complete offer of love for the world, the world rejects Jesus. The love of God meets the world's lack of love in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The crucifixion of Jesus is the culmination of a history of sin. This is the remarkable thing: Precisely *then* – in the very same event – God makes the complete offer of love.

By the witness of the apostles, in the testimony of the Gospels, in the preaching of the Church, in the Christian tradition, the news of who the crucified one is breaks forth. The one we in this world killed is the Son of God, given for us.

You took his body, *but he gave it to you*. You shed his blood, *but he shed it for you*. Receive him for who he is, and his death will bring you new life.

Jesus is the gift of love, and he is given totally and unreservedly to undeserving people. He is a pure gift, and he is all in. By the gift of himself in the Eucharist, the Lord says directly to each of us: This is the way to really live. I

give you myself. Receive me, then go and do likewise. Give yourself.

“The true purpose of the Mass,” Jesuit Father Joseph Putz once explained, “is not to make Christ offer himself anew for us: He has offered himself ‘once for all’ (Heb 10:10); nor is it to make us offer Christ instead of ourselves, but to make us offer ourselves with him and through him.”

The point is to become what we receive – to dance, to translate this love into the offering of ourselves in love. That is how we *receive* rather than *break from* communion.

## **The whole Eucharist**

For those of us who receive Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, we receive everything he gives us. That means that we receive not *something* but *someone*. To receive that gift, we must allow ourselves to become for others what he is for us. What we do for others, and the way we serve others, must say, “I am for you.”

Pope Benedict XVI explained this communion between the Lord’s gift of himself to us and our gift of ourselves for others when he wrote, “A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented” (*Deus Caritas Est*, No. 14).

In other words, if we receive him in the Eucharist but do not love our neighbor through concrete practices, we break the communion we receive. Without concretely acting in love toward others, we have received Christ’s gift but not his way of giving. We have not allowed the Lord to be the source of our lives. We only *really* live when we welcome Christ fully and then translate his love in ourselves through our love for others.

How does this translation take place? Through the works of mercy. We become Christ’s love when we feed the hungry, give

drink to the thirsty, give alms to the poor, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned and bury the dead. We become Christ's love when we instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish the sinner, forgive trespasses, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. These are concrete practices of love; they are all costly, and they are all life-giving. These are the ways of joining in Christ's offering of himself to us. This is how we dance.

At least once each week, we should each concretely perform at least one work of mercy. We should practice different works of mercy from week to week, rather than settling into the one we like best or that somehow "suits us." Not only do these works stretch us, they also allow us to say "thank you" to the Lord for his gift and way of giving for us. We thank him through our love for others. That, after all, is what "Eucharist" means: thanksgiving.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lenny".

*Leonard J. DeLorenzo, Ph.D., works in the McGrath Institute for Church Life and teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame. Subscribe to his weekly newsletter, "Life, Sweetness, Hope," at [bit.ly/lifesweetnesshope](http://bit.ly/lifesweetnesshope).*