



Catholic Commentaries

by

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WISE MEN AND THE CHRISTMAS CHOICE

(January 11, 2023)

The Magi have come and gone. With the Epiphany the Christmas narrative concludes.

The popular story of the foreign travelers charms the masses with a star-studded discovery of the Nativity and the presentation of unique gifts. But that scene by which the Christmas creche is completed takes up just one verse in the Gospel story (Matt 2:1-12)!



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The bigger drama to consider arises from the contrast between the Magi and everyone else in the biblical tale.

The Magi are adventurers, inspired to make an 800-mile trip from Persia to Judea by an unexpected light in the sky. But it's not for their knowledge of stars that tradition refers to them as "the three wise men." It's the choice they make to acknowledge, even to their great surprise, that lying before them is a newborn King – Jesus, the child "they saw with Mary his mother." So convinced were they that they had found the One, "they did him homage" and offered lavish gifts, valuable in material and symbolism, though not very useful for a newborn!

The others in the story are the "influencers" of that time and place: King Herod, his chief priests, and the scribes of the people. They provide the narrative foil that generates meaning for us in this day and age.

Upon hearing the extraordinary news from the Magi that "a star had risen" signaling a royal birth, Herod was "greatly troubled," as were "all the people of Jerusalem." Yet, amazingly, none of those religious leaders or believers – in fact, no one at all – made the short trip to Bethlehem to see whether the news might be true.

Why not? What stifled their curiosity? How could they be so indifferent? Was no one willing to consider the possibility of what that star meant for everyone?

Among the possible explanations, [Matthew Kuchem](#) proposes a political one. They preferred to remain in the safety and security they had already created for themselves, where the meaning of their lives was found in the values of this world, without any need to refer to the realm of heaven.

“They sought first their own power and position within the political order of the day. They seemed to think they could achieve their religious and political purposes through allying themselves with a powerful and successful political figure. They lost sight of to whom they owed their allegiance, and they equated their religious and political agenda with the building of God’s kingdom.” In short, they abandoned their sacred convictions for the sake of social conventions.

Celebrating the Epiphany invites us to see again the incredible gift of Christmas – the grace of God coming into this world, to inaugurate a new kingdom, to bring the heavenly light of truth through the Word becoming flesh, to transform our world by means of a redeeming love from within the very midst of our sinful human lives. This is the Good News of Christianity that makes for the greatest story ever told.

But it seems that story is losing its impact, as a star loses its light. Writing of the legacy of Benedict XVI, [Larry Chapp](#) reminds us that the contemporary world appears to be constructed on the proposition that God is completely irrelevant to how society should operate. Indeed, an increasing number of people live as if God does not really matter. Chapp notes that the pope emeritus identified this trend years ago. “The real problem at this moment of our history,” Benedict wrote in 2009, “is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects.”



CNS/Reuters

That moment continues as our new year begins. Now we return to our routines, but with another gift from the Magi – the Christmas choice.

Will we remain overjoyed at God’s having come into our world, or be overwhelmed by the tribulations we face? Will we follow the supernatural light from heaven, or the supposed enlightenment of human ideologies? Will we pay homage to Jesus as the source of ultimate meaning in our own lives, or not?

We call the Magi “wise men” because they made the right choice – and did so despite the indifference or opposition of others, and without regard for their own power or prestige. They chose to adore the Christ-child and to share their gifts in gratitude for his presence in the world.

Hopefully, the perfect gift that Christmas is will inspire us to do the same, in weekly worship and everywhere we go throughout the new year.

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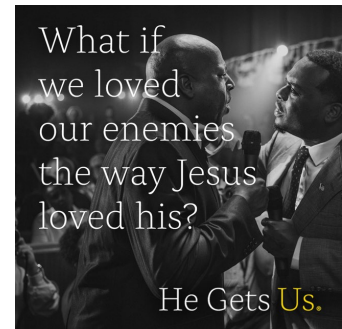
A NOD TOWARD “LOVE YOUR ENEMIES”

(February 22, 2023)

The Super Bowl has come and gone, its final score to be celebrated by some, forgotten by most. But before that fateful Sunday fades from view, a message from that day deserves a replay.

Two commercials aired during the Super Bowl that spoke of Jesus to say that “He gets us.” The worldwide evangelization took just ninety seconds, yet cost \$20 million.

The [organization](#) sponsoring those ads publicly admits having an agenda, namely, to counteract the cultural climate in which people with opposing views on social issues hate those on the other side, considering them to be not just wrong but “enemies.” It’s the mindset that thinks being right requires a fight.



HeGetsUs.com

It’s also the mentality that Jesus decries in the Gospel. Jesus hated no one. Ever. Not even now. He gets us.

But Jesus also seeks a radical reversal. Without mincing words, He makes his message clear: “You have heard that it was said, ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*’ But I say to you ... When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well.” He makes the image a mandate when He follows up with “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:38-39,44).

Decades ago, scholars in [The Jesus Seminar](#) reckoned those verses to be among the most authentic of Jesus’s many sayings – precisely because they are so radical and revolutionary. Does Jesus actually mean what He says? Yes – quite literally.

That He gets us is not the only Good News. That He tells us is not the only authentic saying. The real joy of the Gospel is that He shows us.

Faced with the inhumanity of undeserved suffering, Jesus demonstrates God’s passionate love for all people. Slapped repeatedly, mocked endlessly, and scourged painfully, Jesus does not resist or retaliate. He turns the other cheek. Strung up on a cross to die the most ignoble of deaths, His own words fulfill His mandate: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus does get us and has given us the quintessential Christian approach to life in this world: “Love your enemies.”

That’s not to say that Jesus forsakes justice, which remains essential for the good order of any society. But holding wrongdoers accountable does not require that we hate them.

Hatred, like love, comes from within, as an attitude of the heart that leads to a choice. Following the Master's words, Christians are called to choose love, even with hatred so evidently all around us. That's the only way to break the chain of evil, [as Pope Francis once explained](#).

Vatican Media



But that chain won't break because of two Super Bowl ads. In fact, reactions to the commercials show what a long way the Christian story still has to go. One [major media outlet](#) claimed "it is precisely this trope that outrage is bad, and one must suppress it, that hints to what is so wrong with these ads." A [prominent legislator](#) tweeted that the sponsors contributed "millions to make fascism look benign."

Beyond advertising, real change comes when the way of the cross becomes the road to victory. The Jesus who gets us, who tells us and shows us that road, also empowers us to travel it. We do so first by recognizing the magnanimity of God toward ourselves, seeing in Jesus the Son of God who died for the salvation of all. We then make progress along the way by practicing the Gospel: "love your enemies."

No doubt, we may not really hate anyone or have any sworn enemies. But the urge to retaliate and avenge lies deep within us all. It shows itself when we are insulted and want to argue, when our character is maligned and we stand to defend ourselves, when we are injured or hurt and think that "someone should pay."

Each is a natural reaction, unsurprising or even welcomed by the world. Still, we have a choice: resist or receive, fight back or forgive, hate or love.

Lent reminds us of the Christian choice. So, if you want to give something up, do without revenge. Instead, pray for your persecutors – someone who opposes you or hurts your friends or brings harm to the world. Choose an "enemy" each day and pray for them. Pray for them by name. Pray for them genuinely. Pray for peace to prevail.

"He gets us" offered Super Bowl viewers a thought-provoking ad campaign. The real question offered by Lent is – do we get Him?

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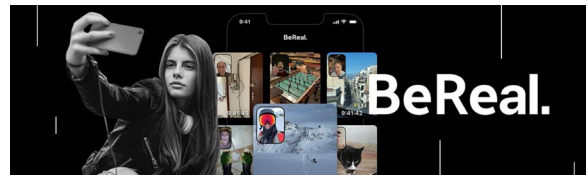
CORDIALITY GIVES US THE WAY TO “BE REAL”

(May 12, 2023)

It’s “time to be real.”

So says a popular [social media app](#) as it notifies users to snap and share a photo of what they’re doing at that moment.

Supposedly, this makes online communications more authentic than all those curated images or videos that social media users share in the hopes of presenting more “like”-able versions of themselves and their lives.



But snippets and snapshots, whether random or rehearsed, can never tell the full story. No matter how personal, images cannot capture and do not reveal the person.

The reality of who we are does not reside in what is external to us. What matters most does not appear in any single moment. Rather, human authenticity arises from within, when we “speak with the heart.”

That’s the title, and the thrust, of Pope Francis’s Message for the 2023 World Communications Day. Recapping previous messages, he writes that “It is the heart that spurred us to go, to see and to listen, and it is the heart that moves us towards an open and welcoming way of communicating.”



Once we have practiced listening – the kind that waits patiently and foregoes the need to assert our own viewpoint as soon as we get a chance – then, says the pope, “we can enter into the dynamic of dialogue and sharing, which is precisely that of *communicating in a cordial way*.”

To show what that means, the pope points to “one of the brightest and still fascinating examples” of social communications – St. Francis de Sales. “His meek attitude, humanity and willingness to dialogue patiently with everyone, especially with those who disagreed with him, make him an extraordinary witness of God’s merciful love.”

For the Holy Father, this centenary year of the proclamation of Francis de Sales as patron of Catholic journalists offers the opportunity to re-consider communications not in terms of a strategy, aided by technology, but as “a reflection of the soul.” That viewpoint comes to memorable expression in the saint’s maxim, given to a new bishop who asked for advice on how to preach: “In order to speak well, it is enough to love well.”

With sound advice of his own, the pope applies this principle to communications within the Church and the world. In the former, he points to the synodal process, where a pressing needs exists “for communication that kindles hearts, that is balm on wounds and that shines light on the journey of our brothers and sisters.” About the latter, the pope recognizes that “today more than ever, speaking with the heart is essential to foster a culture of peace in places where there is war; to open paths that allow for dialogue and reconciliation in places where hatred and enmity rage.”



The papal message this year rightly acknowledges the value of cordial communications on a global scale. But, just as all politics is local, so all communication becomes “real” when we apply this Salesian virtue to our ordinary, everyday communications.

We communicate cordially when we first encounter another person. If we choose to begin with respect – an attitude that radiates from the heart – then our words are more likely to be nice than nasty.

We communicate cordially when conversations turn to heated subjects. If we choose to affirm the person more so than his/her viewpoints – an affability cultivated in the heart – then our differences are less likely to lead to discord between us.

We communicate cordially when we don’t expect or demand more from others than from ourselves. If we choose to be neighborly – acknowledging in our hearts that others are kindred spirits struggling along the road of life, just as we are – then our interactions will no longer suffer from rash judgment or harsh condemnation.

It seems a strange image, but how our heart sees leads to how our voices speak.

For this reason, St. Francis de Sales championed cordiality as a little virtue – one that often goes unnoticed but has an undeniably beneficial effect on us and on others.

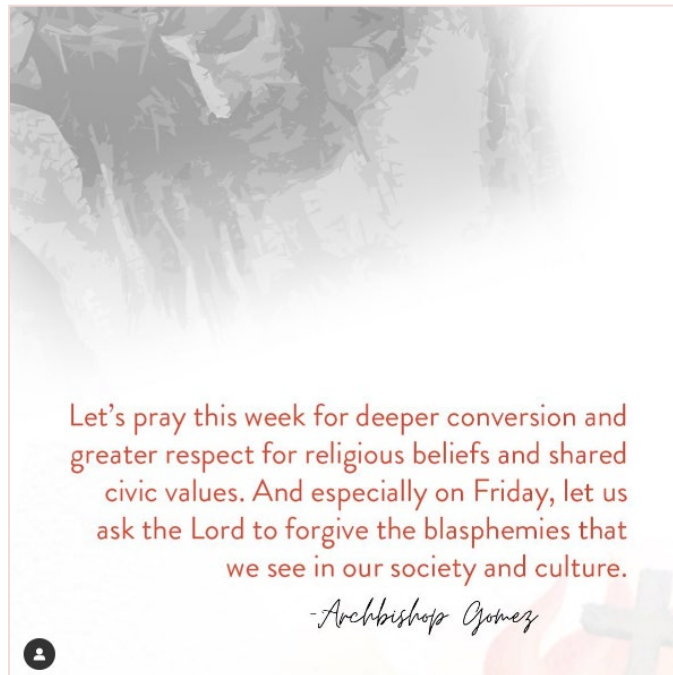
For Pope Francis, that virtue also holds the potential to affect our collective future, for “from the heart come the right words to dispel the shadows of a closed and divided world and to build a civilization which is better than the one we have received.”

As we celebrate this year’s World Day of Communications (on May 20), it’s time again to “be real” – which we will be whenever we share the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) by “speaking with the heart.”

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The [United States Bishops](#) have invited Catholics to pray to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the feast day (June 16). This year’s call to prayer responds, in particular, to the outrageous decision twice made by the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team to honor a group known for their vulgar, indeed blasphemous, [mockery of the Catholic faith and of the women religious](#) who live it so devotedly.

Some think it’s just a gimmick. But [L.A. Catholics](#) gets the motivation right, reminding us that “The hurt on our hearts can only be healed by the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Likewise, we can be set on fire by his love to witness to the sacred truth, goodness, and beauty of our faith with conviction and courage.”



Devotion to the Sacred Heart figures prominently in the tradition of Salesian spirituality. For St. Francis de Sales, the predominant metaphor for our human sojourn pictures a world of interconnected hearts – human and divine – to express the harmonious state of life and love to which human beings are eternally destined. But, as is clear from human history, we have not yet arrived there; in fact, as the news from L.A. shows, we have a long way to go.

Still, our journey to eternal life has begun and has been set on the right course thanks to God’s visitation of this world in the person of His Son, Jesus. In His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we discover all we need for eternal salvation. Especially on Mount Calvary, where His Sacred Heart was pierced open to pour out the full graces of redemption, we find what St. Francis de Sales describes as a “school of love” for the [revival](#) of Christian life.

In that school, the Master teaches us personally. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

Through prayer we tap into this sacred truth by listening to what Jesus wishes to reveal to His own “little children.” For those who desire happiness, “*Come to me,*” He says – not to the self-proclaimed and self-serving seers of secular culture, whose politically correct perspectives are limited to this world. For those who seek meaning in life, “*learn from me,*” He insists – rather than trusting in partial human knowledge or in being guided by the cause du jour. He can claim, “*I am gentle,*” for His deeds show love and mercy shared with all the world, despite our indifference toward Him and our sins against Him. And He rightly identifies Himself as “lowly in heart,” for He has need of nothing for Himself, but wants only for us to know how much we are loved and for us to return love for love by how we treat one another.

That love, which alone gives *rest for our souls*, comes from Him who revealed His heart to St. Margaret Mary (1647-1690), a nun in the religious order of the Visitation of Holy Mary founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. From her mystical experiences, she describes the Sacred Heart of Jesus in terms of “Its treasures of love, mercy, grace, sanctification, and salvation.” These treasures, in stark contrast to today’s vulgar mockery, are revealed to her, and through her to us, “in order that those who were willing to do all in their power to render and procure for Him honor, love, and glory might be enriched abundantly, even profusely, with these divine treasures of the Heart of God, which is their source.”

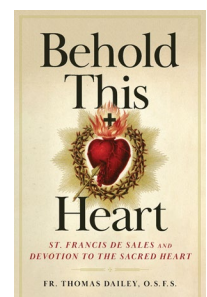


In the school of sacred truth, we can comprehend the love of Christ by looking to His Sacred Heart. But each time we gaze prayerfully upon that icon of divine love, something else happens. Not only do we look upon it, but it looks back at us. If we allow it, this contemplative gaze will excite our mind, arouse our affection, and stir our will to live a truly devout life.

Gazing upon the Sacred Heart of Jesus draws us into a personal encounter with Him, and with the divine mercy that remains always greater than the trials and tribulations we experience in this life. Seeing that Heart of Christ, and being seen by it, helps us realize that the best hope for coming together as a society lies not in the egregious publicity stunts of a major league baseball team, but in the steadfast grace and power of the divine heart.

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This commentary draws from
[*Behold This Heart: St. Francis de Sales and Devotion to the Sacred Heart*](#)
(Sophia Institute, 2021).



REALLY CELEBRATING SUMMER

(June 16, 2023)

By now, the celebration of summer has begun – with festivals, parades, and seasonal practices that make for fun in the sun.

The Church does not celebrate meteorological seasons, but this time of year does have its own feasts (Pentecost, Trinity) and processions (Corpus Christi) and rituals (Sacred Heart novena).



(photo: John Bunyea | Catholic News Herald)

Both types of summer celebrations share a sense of seasonal joy. But those of the ecclesiastical kind arise from a different vision than the secular ones.

More significant than fun in the sun, our devotional festivities express an essentially “apostolic” vision of life in this world.

To be apostolic in vision ... is to recognize that Christians don’t see *some* things differently than others: they see *everything* differently in the light of the extraordinary drama they have come to understand. To be apostolic is to do more than assent to a set of doctrinal truths or moral precepts, essential as they are; it is to experience daily the adventure that arises from the encounter with Christ; to view events and people moment by moment in the light of that vision; to be cause by the perilous and joy-filled work of learning to be transformed into divine beings headed for eternal rapture in the exhilarating embrace of God” (*From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, pp. 74-75).

St. Francis de Sales embraced this apostolic vision; as a Doctor of the Church, he communicated it with an inspired sense. In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he describes our Sunday celebration in especially evocative terms, as



the sun of all spiritual exercises – the most holy, sacred, and supremely sovereign sacrament and sacrifice of the Mass, center of the Christian religion, heart of devotion, and soul of piety, the ineffable mystery that comprises within itself the deepest depths of divine charity, the mystery in which God really gives himself and gloriously communicates his graces and favors to us” (II:14).

As light is necessary for life, so the Mass is the Church’s sun. But unlike any other day, Sunday celebrates what is supremely sovereign; as a sacred moment, it is set apart (“holy”) in both time and place, in recognition of God’s doing, not ours. Our weekly feast memorializes the redemptive self-sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross; it makes real God’s salvific presence in the world.

As the heart of devotion, our Sunday celebration enlivens us from within; as the soul of piety it touches upon and transforms that which is profoundly spiritual about being human. Being fundamentally sacramental, not just social, Mass is mysterious; it “works” through the ineffable power of divine grace. It discloses the depths of divine charity by re-presenting the Father’s condescension to/for us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. In this way, we can see and hear and experience again the gift of God’s sharing the grace and favor of his eternal love with us.

We celebrate all of that every week! The more we adopt this sacramental sensibility, and revive our appreciation of Eucharistic faith, the more joyous summer will be.

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EVEN SAINTS NEED TO GROW UP!

(August 24, 2023)

From my somewhat elevated seat in the sanctuary each weekend, I have a clear view of most of the people in the pews. Regularly am I entertained – actually, edified – by families with children of a single-digit age.

Frankly, moms don't get enough credit!

Their determination to teach little ones the art of worship displays heroic virtue. Their steadfastness amid all kinds of carrying-on deserves admiration. Somehow they, themselves, manage to pray, even while remaining alert to what's happening on their right and left.

One might say that Mary's Assumption gives "credit" to her maternal life and work. But what was it really like for the Blessed Mother raising Jesus as a young child? We know the intriguing story about the Holy Family's pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem ([Luke 2:41-52](#)).

But what about their regular attendance at the local synagogue?

It's probably safe to assume that everything was fine as fine could be; after all, Jesus is said to have grown "in wisdom and age and favor" while with his mother in Nazareth.



But one would be mistaken to presume that mothers of saints have it easier than others.

Take, for example, Madame de Boisy and her son, Francis de Sales, whose birthday we remember this week (August 21, 1567). Francis was the firstborn of thirteen children, so this very young mother certainly had her hands full. Despite his frailty, he was known to act out occasionally, as we see in these vignettes:



(illustrations by Alain d'Orange, 1956)

- One day he went, without permission, into the kitchen and silently demanded a fresh pastry, so the cook took one hot from the oven and put it in his hand!
- Another time, he swiped a trinket from one of the workers; after owning up to it, he felt the rod of his father’s wrath and the shame of being disciplined in front of others.
- And once, while his father was meeting with a friend of the family who was a Calvinist, young Francis raised a ruckus outside the window by chasing chickens around and yelling “out with the heretics.” Even in a castle, rebellious youth get grounded!

He may not have been a young angel, but Francis de Sales did grow to become a saint, known especially for his humility and gentleness in the face of human faults. One can fairly suppose that his mother played a key role in that growth, as [we know the Blessed Mother did](#).

There’s a lesson there: even saints first have to grow up!

Saints don’t come with holiness built in, as much as they learn it along the way, on a personal path that includes any number of fits and starts occasioned by youthful mistakes and overcome through steadfast parental guidance.

So, too, for us and for our stories. Knowing the down-to-earth lives of saints like Francis de Sales makes holiness more “real” for the rest of us. As we try to make the good choices that will help us grow in grace, let’s also show some deference to the moms of little ones – especially in church!

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featured image: <https://childrenschurch.wordpress.com/tag/luke-2-41-52/>
secondary image: scanned from *Saint François de Sales*, by Abbé Francis Saunier (Paris: Éditions Fleurus, 1956)

A LITTLE ECSTASY WOULD MAKE FOR A REAL EUCHARISTIC REVIVAL!

(November 16, 2023)

If only churches were like ball parks! Just imagine: parking lots filled to capacity with pre-Mass bonding, excitable chants echoing all around, communal camaraderie in fashionable display, devoted attention to the action, and joyous reverie at winning outcomes.

OK, it's an admittedly unrealistic scenario, especially with all the other shenanigans taking place at professional games. But there's something to "[sport-uality](#)" that merits attention.



(image: Margo Reed/Inquirer)

That thought comes to mind when considering the Church's [National Eucharistic Revival](#). The term conjures up those old-time tent meetings that drew large-scale crowds to hear spirit-filled preachers or, in more modern form, to listen to [musical ministrations](#) in concert halls.

Focused on the Eucharist, the Catholic version of a "revival" is billed as a grassroots response to the call of Jesus, "a movement to restore understanding and devotion to this great mystery here in the United States by helping us renew our worship of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist."



The movement originated, in part, as a response to the disturbing findings of a 2019 poll by the Pew Research Center which found that only 31% of Catholics believe the Church's teaching about what the Eucharist is, with more than two-thirds believing the bread and wine to be (just) symbols.

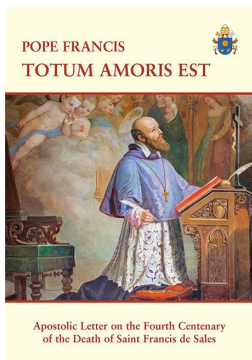
Those findings have since been rectified by a better-articulated [CARA survey](#), the results of which indicate a much greater adherence to the traditional doctrine. Thus, a lack of knowledge about the Church's teaching is not the cause of the downslide in Eucharistic worship.

Yet, as [Timothy O'Malley](#) rightly suggests, we still need to renew the meaning of the Eucharist in Catholic life because it manifests "the deepest identity of the Church." In the current cultural climate, where religious belief is simply an individual option, he notes that "what we must present is an encounter with the living God, a persuasive vision of human flourishing grounded in the love of the triune God."

For that renewal to become a real revival, how we celebrate Mass matters – for priests and parishioners alike. What we do each week at church offers an opportunity, far more than it meets an obligation. It’s the opportunity to experience “ecstasy.”

It's not the kind of ecstasy found in ballparks or meeting tents or concert halls. But its power works in a similar way.

The celebration of Mass evinces an experience of ecstasy when we appreciate the event being celebrated for the supernatural feat that it is. During each Sunday ritual, we experience the sacrificial love of God in Jesus that redeems us and remains really present with us in the Eucharist through the power of the Holy Spirit.



For St. Francis de Sales, that sacramental experience is ecstatic in as much as it moves us to “go out of and beyond ourselves and remain there so as to be united with God” (*Treatise on the Love of God*, VII:4).

Pope Francis champions this Salesian notion of ecstasy in a recent [apostolic letter](#), where he presents it as “the joyous exuberance of a Christian life that transcends the mediocrity of mere conformity” to religious obligations. This ecstasy engenders a coming alive again “that rediscovers the wellsprings of joy and avoids the temptation of self-centeredness.”

In Salesian spirituality, that ecstatic experience works in a threefold way at Mass and beyond. It changes our minds – an ecstasy of intellect – so that we can understand the bread we see to be a gift from heaven, from the God who provides life to us. It changes our hearts – an ecstasy of affection – so that we can appreciate what we eat as Jesus really present with us, leading us to take pleasure in the God within us. And it changes our lives – an ecstasy of action – so that we can be pleasing to God by living in obedience to the divine will in and through our day-to-day lives.



Our Masses may not reflect the fanatical enthusiasm of a ballpark or a concert hall. But there each Sunday we can share in a spiritual ecstasy, what Oblate Father James Langelan describes as an intensity of divine love that has the power to move us out of our self-enclosure and self-centeredness. And by that weekly movement in our minds and hearts and acts, our own flourishing is more likely to bring about a real revival in the Church.

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