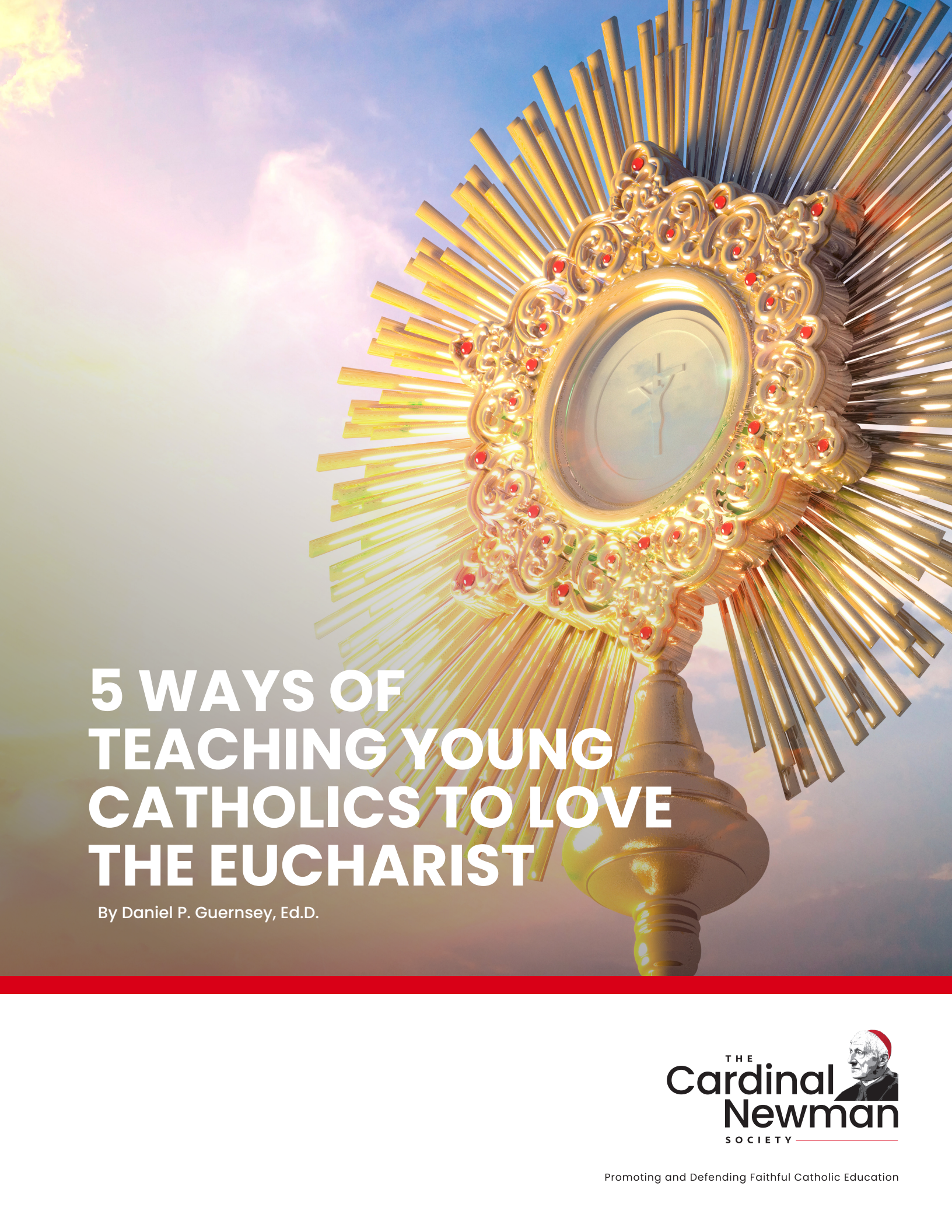




5 WAYS OF TEACHING YOUNG CATHOLICS TO LOVE THE EUCHARIST

By Daniel P. Guernsey, Ed.D.



Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

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It's a crisis! About three-quarters of young adult Catholics in the United States do not believe in the Eucharist.

Surveys have revealed that most baptized Catholics simply don't accept this fundamental truth of our Catholic faith—that Jesus truly gives Himself to us at every Mass: body and blood, soul and divinity.

This is a crisis of faith, but it's also a crisis of education. One major survey indicates that most Catholics who don't believe in the Eucharist also have little understanding of what the Church actually teaches about the Eucharist.

That's why The Cardinal Newman Society—which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education—launched our Task Force for Eucharistic Education, to mobilize Catholic educators to better teach students about the Eucharist, increase reverence in student liturgies, and strengthen devotion to the Real Presence of Christ.

Our Task Force supports the U.S. bishops' three-year Eucharistic Revival, intended to bring Catholics back to the “source and summit” of the Catholic faith. Catholics across the country are studying, adoring, and restoring faith in the Eucharist.

But how do we reach young people?

In my several years as principal of a parish K-12 school—a job I left just recently to establish the Catholic educational leadership program at Ave Maria University—I learned a few lessons that might be helpful to parents and other educators. There are, of course, other ways of teaching Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist, but I hope these suggestions help.

First, I should state the obvious: young people need the Eucharist explained to them. It is a profound mystery, that bread and wine could become the body and blood of Christ! In an age-appropriate way, parents and educators need to ensure that young people know and understand this difficult but essential truth.

However, as we say often at The Cardinal Newman Society, the Catholic formation of students requires more than instruction—it requires the experience of God in wonder and Sacrament. It requires beauty and reverence. And it requires the clear witness of adults around them. An education that forms virtuous and faithful Catholics must tend to each student's will and desires as much as memory, judgment, and reason.

As Pope St. John Paul II warned in *Catechesi Tradendae*, education can become too “intellectualized” without sacramental and Eucharistic devotion. Young people need to know of Christ’s Real Presence in the Mass, but they also need to love and adore Him.

So here are some ways of helping young people come to truly know Christ in the Eucharist:

1. Make Eucharistic devotion an explicit, visible part of formation.

At the school I recently led, the mission statement declared it to be a place “in which students encounter Christ and pursue excellence in all things. Our students will deepen their love of God and others through the pursuit of all that is true, good, and beautiful.”

That should be the aim of all Catholic education, although each school will have its own formal mission statement. And every Catholic home should be a “domestic church” of Christ, fulfilling the parents’ baptismal promises to raise the child in the Catholic faith.

Our school expressed this mission visibly in the school seal, including images of our parish church, a monstrance, a stylized Sacred Heart as part of a shamrock (our school’s team name), a book, and the words *Christum novisse* (encountering Christ). The seal served as a story platform, by which we shared how students encounter Christ and pursue excellence through the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), their love for God and each other (the Sacred Heart), and their studies (the book).

Whether in the home or school, beautiful Catholic artwork including crucifixes, paintings, icons, and statues are far more than an expression of religious affiliation. They inspire reverence to God amid the activities of daily life and invite contemplation of His mysteries. To increase devotion to the Eucharist, these might include photos and artifacts memorializing children’s First Communion, images of the Last Supper, and paintings like *The Disputation of the Holy Eucharist* by Raphael or *The Virgin of the Host* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

Music likewise inspires the soul, and a Catholic’s music education should include works that inspire devotion to the Eucharist. These could range from the classical beauty of the Masses by Bach, Handel, and Palestrina to the contemplative musings of John Michael Talbot or contemporary Catholic worship. Most important, Catholics should be familiar with the great traditional music that is appropriate to reverent Masses, including the hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas (*Adora Te Devote*, *Panis Angelicus*, *Tantum Ergo*) and Gregorian chant.

Of course, Eucharistic devotion goes beyond song and imagery to every aspect of student formation—in the home, in the classroom, in the chapel, and on the playing field. The Cardinal Newman Society has identified five key principles distilled from the Church’s many documents guiding Catholic education, and one can quickly see how devotion to the Eucharist hits all five principles.

1. Catholic education serves the Church's mission of salvation and evangelization.
2. Catholic education models Christian communion, both in its own Catholic community and by standing in full communion with Christ and His Church.
3. Catholic education helps students know and live in Christ by Prayer, Scripture, and Sacrament.
4. Catholic education is integral: it forms the human person in mind, body, and soul.
5. Catholic education imparts a Christian understanding of the world.

The Eucharist is the summation of everything we do to form young Catholics. If students get the Real Presence right, everything else falls into place.

2. Make Mass a central, reverent, and frequent part of a student's life.

Daily Mass creates a strong, vibrant Catholic culture in a Catholic school and builds faithful Catholic families. At our school, we built a slightly longer school day that allowed for daily Mass without a homily (about 25 minutes). We dimmed the lights, with Gregorian chant playing as students arrived. We promoted kneeling before Mass, emphasizing the importance of reverence even when it seemed a bit uncomfortable without kneelers.

On Fridays, a short homily was added along with beautiful, sacred music sung by a choir. We invested heavily in our choir and showered them with treats and awards, as they served multiple functions in our community. We heavily recruited and enticed students to join the choir to ensure its elevated status.

In addressing the current loss of Eucharistic devotion in the Church, author and Catholic education expert Father Peter Stravinskis has said, "Clear, unambiguous, orthodox teaching on the Holy Eucharist must be bolstered by unequivocal signs and symbols in the sacred liturgy. Students desperately need a sense of the sacred, of mystery, and of awe in God's presence. To get students to encounter Christ in the Eucharist, we must do Liturgy and worship extremely well."

In celebrating the Eucharist together with young people, Catholic parents and educators should be thoughtful, intentional, and spare no expense in time and effort to fill this need.

3. Encourage frequent visits to the Tabernacle.

In our school, we turned our most central and visible classroom space into a beautiful Eucharistic chapel, big enough for an entire class to visit. Every day our students walked by the chapel, prompting many to stop in for a visit. When the faculty "caught" the

students praying—or students noticed teachers and administrators in the chapel—powerful values were communicated and quietly strengthened. The ease and naturalness of a Eucharist encounter goes a long way!

Likewise, parents can witness to the Real Presence of Christ—who is present in the Eucharist at all times, not only during Mass—by making unscheduled visits to parish churches and bringing children to pray before Our Lord. Even when walking or driving past the Tabernacle, make the Sign of the Cross and acknowledge the presence of our King and Savior with reverence.

4. Make time for First Friday Adoration.

The U.S. bishops' conference teaches that Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament flows from the sacrifice of the Mass and deepens our hunger for communion with Christ and the rest of the Church. It is never a substitute for the great Feast of the Holy Mass, but adoring Jesus in the Eucharist is preparation for Mass and for the great banquet in Heaven.

For younger students, our school started small with some singing and prayers, but we slowly cultivated the habit of dwelling peacefully in silence before the Lord. Each class took time to adore Christ throughout the day, and we included the entire school in Benediction. The space was kept dark and prayerful with candles and lingering incense.

Older students often spent up to a full class period in His Presence. We had Rosaries, Bibles, prayer books, and journals on hand.

The participation and witness of adults in Adoration is also important. At our first and last faculty meetings of the year and our Christmas celebration, the faculty gathered for 30 minutes of Adoration and Benediction to pray for each other and our students.

And how much more important is this prayerful unity within families! As the slogan says, the family that prays together stays together. Most important, Adoration puts Christ at the center.

5. Participate in Eucharistic processions.

Our school offered a Eucharistic procession during Catholic schools week, with stations set up around the outside of the school. We found that having a Rosary procession in October prepared students for the needed reverence and focus to achieve a school-wide Eucharistic procession in January. It was important that students kept silent and focused and, when appropriate, knelt on the bare ground as a community in worship and humility. The fruits of this were real and even spectacular!

Families should make a point of participating in parish devotions including Eucharistic processions, Holy Hours, retreats, and more. When children see their parents set aside practical priorities to be in Christ's presence and give Him the higher priority, they are less likely to take the Eucharist for granted and lose faith in the mystery of the Real Presence of Christ.

As I said, these five recommendations are just a few of the ways parents and educators can help young people better know and love Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The key is to be intentional about it. If there is one thing our children should learn—above everything else we think is important to know—it is that God is their beginning and end, and their entire lives should be ordered to Him. Recognizing that Christ is always present for them in the Eucharist is one of the most important lessons of all.

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