



The Hour That Makes My Day | Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

A selection from [A Treasure in Clay](#), the autobiography of Archbishop Sheen.

On the day of my Ordination, I made two resolutions:

1. I would offer the Holy Eucharist every Saturday in honor of the Blessed Mother to solicit her protection on my priesthood. The Epistle to the Hebrews bids the priest offer sacrifices not only for others, but also for himself, since his sins are greater because of the dignity of the office.

2. I resolved also to spend a continuous Holy Hour every day in the presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

In the course of my priesthood I have kept both of these resolutions. The Holy Hour had its origin in a practice I developed a year before I was ordained. The big chapel in St. Paul's Seminary would be locked by six o'clock; there were still private chapels available for private devotions and evening prayers. This particular evening during recreation, I walked up and down outside the closed major chapel for almost an hour. The thought struck me - why not make a Holy Hour of adoration in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament? The next day I began, and the practice is now well over sixty years old.

Briefly, here are some reasons why I have kept up this practice, and why I have encouraged it in others:

First, the Holy Hour is not a devotion; it is a sharing in the work of redemption. Our Blessed Lord used the words "hour" and "day" in two totally different connotations in the Gospel of John. "Day" belongs to God; the "hour" belongs to evil. Seven times in the Gospel of John, the word "hour" is used, and in each instance it refers to the demonic, and to the moments when Christ is no longer in the Father's Hands, but in the hands of men. In the Garden, our Lord contrasted two "hours" - one was the evil hour "this is your hour" - with which Judas could turn out the lights of the

world. In contrast, our Lord asked: "Could you not watch one hour with Me?". In other words, he asked for an hour of reparation to combat the hour of evil; an hour of victimal union with the Cross to overcome the anti-love of sin.

Secondly, the only time Our Lord asked the Apostles for anything was the night he went into his agony. Then he did not ask all of them ... perhaps because he knew he could not count on their fidelity. But at least he expected three to be faithful to him: Peter, James and John. As often in the history of the Church since that time, evil was awake, but the disciples were asleep. That is why there came out of His anguished and lonely Heart the sigh: "Could you not watch one hour with me?" Not for an hour of activity did He plead, but for an hour of companionship.

The third reason I keep up the Holy Hour is to grow more and more into his likeness. As Paul puts it: "We are transfigured into his likeness, from splendor to splendor." We become like that which we gaze upon. Looking into a sunset, the face takes on a golden glow. Looking at the Eucharistic Lord for an hour transforms the heart in a mysterious way as the face of Moses was transformed after his companionship with God on the mountain. Something happens to us similar to that which happened to the disciples at Emmaus. On Easter Sunday afternoon when the Lord met them, he asked why they were so gloomy. After spending some time in his presence, and hearing again the secret of spirituality - "The Son of Man must suffer to enter into his Glory" - their time with him ended and their "hearts were on fire."

The Holy Hour. Is it difficult? Sometimes it seemed to be hard; it might mean having to forgo a social engagement, or rise an hour earlier, but on the whole it has never been a burden, only a joy. I do not mean to say that all the Holy Hours have been edifying, as for example, the one in the church of St. Roch in Paris. I entered the church about three o'clock in the afternoon, knowing that I had to catch a train for Lourdes two hours later. There are only about ten days a year in which I can sleep in the daytime; this was one. I knelt down and said a prayer of adoration, and then sat up to meditate and immediately went to sleep. I woke up exactly at the end of one hour. I said to the Good Lord: "Have I made a Holy Hour?" I thought his angel said: "Well, that's the way the Apostles made their first Holy Hour in the Garden, but don't do it again."

One difficult Holy Hour I remember occurred when I took a train from Jerusalem to Cairo. The train left at four o'clock in the morning; that meant very early rising. On

another occasion in Chicago, I asked permission from a pastor to go into his church to make a Holy Hour about seven o'clock one evening, for the church was locked. He then forgot that he had let me in, and I was there for about two hours trying to find a way of escape. Finally I jumped out of a small window and landed in the coal bin. This frightened the housekeeper, who finally came to my aid.

At the beginning of my priesthood I would make the Holy Hour during the day or the evening. As the years mounted and I became busier, I made the Hour early in the morning, generally before Holy Mass. Priests, like everybody else, are divided into two classes: roosters and owls. Some work better in the morning, others at night. An Anglican bishop who was chided by a companion for his short night prayers explained: "I keep prayed up."

The purpose of the Holy Hour is to encourage deep personal encounter with Christ. The holy and glorious God is constantly inviting us to come to Him, to hold converse with Him, to ask for such things as we need and to experience what a blessing there is in fellowship with Him. When we are first ordained it is easy to give self entirely to Christ, for the Lord fills us then with sweetness, just as a mother gives candy to her baby to encourage her child to take the first step. This exhilaration, however, does not last long; we quickly learn the cost of discipleship, which means leaving nets and boats and counting tables. The honeymoon soon ends, and so does our self-importance at first hearing the stirring title of "Father."

Sensitive love or human love declines with time, but divine love does not. The first is concerned with the body which becomes less and less responsive to stimulation, but in the order of grace, the responsiveness of the divine to tiny, human acts of love intensifies.

Neither theological knowledge nor social action alone is enough to keep us in love with Christ unless both are preceded by a personal encounter with him. When Moses saw the burning bush in the desert, it did not feed on any fuel. The flame, unfed by anything visible, continued to exist without destroying the wood. So personal dedication to Christ does not deform any of our natural gifts, disposition, or character; it just renews without killing. As the wood becomes fire and the fire endures, so we become Christ and Christ endures.

I have found that it takes some time to catch fire in prayer. This has been one of the advantages of the daily Hour. It is not so brief as to prevent the soul from collecting

itself and shaking off the multitudinous distractions of the world. Sitting before the Presence is like a body exposing itself before the sun to absorb its rays. Silence in the Hour is a tête-à-tête with the Lord. In those moments, one does not so much pour out written prayers, but listening takes its place. We do not say: "Listen, Lord, for Thy servant speaks," but "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."

I have often sought some way to explain the fact that we priests are to know Christ, rather than know about Christ. Many translations of the Bible use the word "know" to indicate the unity of two-in-one flesh. For example: "Solomon knew her not," which meant that he had no carnal relations with her. The Blessed Mother said to the Angel at the Annunciation: "I know not man." St. Paul urges husbands to possess their wives in knowledge. The word "know" here indicates two-in-one flesh. The closeness of that identity is drawn from the closeness of the mind with any object it knows. No knife could ever separate my mind from the idea it has of an apple. The ecstatic union of a husband and wife described as "knowing" is to be the foundation of that love by which we priests love Christ.

Intimacy is openness which keeps back no secret and which reveals the heart open to Christ. Too often friends are just "two ships that pass in the night." Carnal love, despite its seeming intimacy, often can become an exchange of two egotisms. The ego is projected onto the other person and what is loved is not the other person, but the pleasure the other person gives. I have noticed throughout my life that whenever I shrank from the demands that the encounter made on me, I would become busier and more concerned with activities. This gave me an excuse for saying: "I don't have time," as a husband can become so absorbed in business as to forget the love of his wife.

It is impossible for me to explain how helpful the Holy Hour has been in preserving my vocation. Scripture gives considerable evidence to prove that a priest begins to fail his priesthood when he fails in his love of the Eucharist. Too often it is assumed that Judas fell because he loved money. Avarice is very rarely the beginning of the lapse and the fall of the ambassador. The history of the Church proves there are many with money who stayed in it. The beginning of the fall of Judas and the end of Judas both revolved around the Eucharist. The first mention that Our Lord knew who it was who would betray him is at the end of the sixth chapter of John, which is the announcement of the Eucharist. The fall of Judas came the night Our Lord gave the Eucharist, the night of the Last Supper.

The Eucharist is so essential to our one-ness with Christ that as soon as Our Lord announced It in the Gospel, It began to be the test of the fidelity of His followers. First, He lost the masses, for it was too hard a saying and they no longer followed Him. Secondly, He lost some of His disciples: "They walked with Him no more." Third, it split His apostolic band, for Judas is here announced as the betrayer.

So the Holy Hour, quite apart from all its positive spiritual benefits, kept my feet from wandering too far. Being tethered to a tabernacle, one's rope for finding other pastures is not so long. That dim tabernacle lamp, however pale and faint, had some mysterious luminosity to darken the brightness of "bright lights." The Holy Hour became like an oxygen tank to revive the breath of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the foul and fetid atmosphere of the world. Even when it seemed so unprofitable and lacking in spiritual intimacy, I still had the sensation of being at least like a dog at the master's door, ready in case he called me.

The Hour, too, became a magister and teacher, for although before we love anyone we must have a knowledge of that person, nevertheless, after we know, it is love that increases knowledge. Theological insights are gained not only from the two covers of a treatise, but from two knees on a prie-dieu before a tabernacle.

Finally, making a Holy Hour every day constituted for me one area of life in which I could preach what I practiced. I very seldom in my life preached fasting in a rigorous kind of way, for I always found fasting extremely difficult; but I could ask others to make the Hour, because I had made it.

Sometimes I wished that I had kept a record of the thousands of letters that I have received from priests and laity telling me how they have taken up the practice of the Holy Hour. Every retreat for priests that I ever gave had this as a practical resolution. Too often retreats are like health conferences. There is a general agreement on the need for health, but there is lacking a specific recommendation on how to be healthy. The Holy Hour became a challenge to priests on the retreat, and then when the tapes of my retreats became available to the laity, it was edifying to read of those who responded to grace by watching an hour daily before the Lord. A monsignor who, because of a weakness for alcohol and consequent scandal, was told to leave his parish went into another diocese on a trial basis, where he made my retreat. Responding to the grace of the Lord, he gave up alcohol, was restored to effectiveness in his priesthood, made the Holy Hour every day and died in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

As an indication of the very wide effect of the Holy Hour, I once received a letter from a priest in England who told me in his own language: "I left the priesthood and fell into a state of degradation." A priest friend invited him to hear a tape on the Holy Hour from a retreat I had given. Responsive to grace, he was restored again to the priesthood and entrusted with the care of a parish. Divine Mercy wrought a change in him, and I received this letter:

We had our annual Solemn Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament last week. I encouraged enough people to come and watch all day and every day, so that we would not have to take the Blessed Sacrament down because of a lack of a number of people to watch. On the final evening, I organized a procession with the First Communicants strewing rose petals in front of the Lord. The men of the parish formed a Guard of Honor. The result was staggering: there were over 250 people present for that final procession and Holy Hour. I am convinced that our people are searching for many of the old devotions which many of the parishes have done away with, and this is very often because we priests cannot be bothered putting ourselves out. Next year I hope that our Solemn Exposition will be even better attended because now the word is getting around. These last couple of weeks I have started a Bible study group; this is to encourage our people to read the Word of God. I start with reading of Scripture which we meditate on that evening; we then have a short Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and meditation on the text until the time of the Benediction.

I have also started going around the parish and saying a Mass in one house in every street each week, and inviting all people in that particular street to come and take part. The response has been quite good, especially since I am only starting. I do not wish to become an activist priest, so I rise early and make my Holy Hour. I still have my own personal problems to contend with, but I have taken courage from your words: "you will have to fight many battles, but do not worry because in the end you will win the war before the Blessed Sacrament."

Many of the laity who have read my books and heard my tapes are also making the Holy Hour.

A state trooper wrote that he had my tapes attached to his motorcycle and would listen to them as he was cruising the highways: "Imagine," he wrote, "the bewilderment of a speeder being stopped by me while from the tape recorder was

coming one of your sermons about the Eucharist." He found it difficult at first to find a church that was open during the day at a time he could make his Hour. Later on, he found a pastor who was not only willing to open the church, but willing to make the Hour with him.

Most remarkable of all was the effect the preaching of the Holy Hour had on non-Catholic ministers. I preached three retreats to Protestant ministers - on two occasions to over three hundred in South Carolina and Florida, and on another occasion to a smaller group at Princeton University. I asked them to make a continuous Holy Hour of prayer in order to combat the forces of evil in the world, because that is what our Lord asked for the night of His Agony. I addressed them: "You are not blessed with the same Divine Presence in your churches that I believe we possess. But you do have another presence that we do also, and that is the Scripture. At the Vatican Council we had a solemn procession of the Scriptures into the Council every morning as a form of the Presence of God. You could make the Hour before the Scriptures." Many came to me later to inquire about the Eucharist, some even asked to join with me in a Holy Hour before the Eucharist.

Most remarkable of all was the telephone call I received early one morning in Los Angeles. The caller announced himself as Reverend Jack McAllister. He was most insistent that he see me. I told him that I was catching a plane for New York at midday and would be glad to see him at the airport before leaving.

A very distinguished Christian gentleman appeared, Mr. Jack McAllister, who told me that he was engaged in a work of world evangelization, sending tapes on the Gospel to all parts of the world, and also mailing millions of copies of sermons and scriptures to every quarter of the globe: "There is one thing missing from world evangelism, and that is a spiritual practice which will make it successful. What would you recommend?" I recounted how much I depended on a daily Holy Hour before the Eucharist, and then suggested that since he was not blessed with the Eucharist, he could ask all of his people to spend one continuous hour with the Scriptures, in prayer and reparation for the sins of the world.

One year later I received a pamphlet from him entitled: "Jack McAllister writes to ONE HOUR WATCHERS." A paragraph from that pamphlet reads:

Please ... if you are honestly concerned about making Christ known to literally every creature - give God one hour a day. You are needed in God's prayer-force to

prepare for work in the totally unevangelized areas of the world. Do you love them enough to pray? Will you 'pay the price' of spiritual battle for one hour daily? Christ asked: 'What, could you not watch with Me one hour?'

At the end of the first year, he wrote and told me that seven hundred ministers had pledged one hour a day.

As I am now writing this book (about six years after our meeting in the airport) he sends this message: "We have now mobilized and trained over 100,000 One-Hour-Watchers. We are preparing to train an elite army to pray four to six to eight hours daily - 'pray ye therefore' - the only solution to the problems of World Evangelism."

One of the by-products of the Holy Hour was the sensitiveness to the Eucharistic Presence of our Divine Lord. I remember once reading in Lacordaire, the famous orator of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris: "Give me the young man who can treasure for days, weeks and years, the gift of a rose or the touch of a hand of a friend."

Seeing early in my priesthood that marriages break and friends depart when sensitiveness and delicacy are lost, I took various means to preserve that responsiveness. When first ordained and a student at the Catholic University in Washington, I would never go to class without climbing the few stairs to the chapel in Caldwell Hall to make a tiny act of love to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Later, at the University of Louvain in Belgium, I would make a visit to Our Lord in every single church I passed on the way to class. When I continued graduate work in Rome and attended the Angelicum and Gregorian, I would visit every church en route from the Trastevere section where I lived. This is not so easy in Rome, for there are churches on almost every corner so that you may pray to get across the street; the church on the other corner is to thank God that you made it.

Later as a teacher at the Catholic University in Washington, I arranged to put a chapel immediately at the entrance of the front door of my home. This was in order that I might never come in or go out without seeing the sanctuary lamp as a summons to adore the Heart of Christ at least for a few seconds. I tried to be faithful to this practice all during my life, and even now in the apartment in New York where I live, the chapel is between my study and my bedroom. This means that I can never move from one area of my small apartment to another without at least a genuflection and a small ejaculation to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Even at night, when I am awakened and arise, I always make it a point to drop into the

chapel for a few seconds, recalling the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord, offering a prayer for the priests and religious of the world, and for all who are in spiritual need. Even this autobiography is written in his Presence, that he might inspire others when I am gone to make the Hour that makes Life.

Up to this point a reader may form a very incorrect judgment of the author. While it is true that this practice of sensitiveness to the Eucharistic Presence has been a powerful means of keeping my head above water, it by no means argues to the integrity of my priesthood.

Respect for the Eucharist is not the whole of the priesthood; it is just one of the facets. It is true that many may have seen me in the front of the church, but this is no more guarantee of my love of God than was the presence of the Pharisee in the front of the temple. The Publican in the back, who would not even dare lift his head, was far more acceptable to God. At the Last Supper, Peter boasted to the Lord that though all others denied him, he would not; and yet in the cold courtyard of Caiaphas, he said to the maid who asked him if he had been with the Master: "I know him not."

I know thousands of priests who have not had the practice of making frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, but I am absolutely sure that, in the sight of God, they are a thousand times more worthy than I. In any case, this is the story of the means I chose in my priesthood to be able to keep step with my brother priests in the service of the Lord.

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