Eucharistic and Marian processions in Catholic tradition: Theology, history, and the sacred processions of Lourdes

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Introduction

Any day visit to Lourdes will include the Eucharistic procession in the afternoon, and, for those keen to stay a little later, the Torchlight (Marian) procession in the evening. While for some a visit to the baths is the high point, or perhaps spending time at the grotto, for many, the processions provide a profoundly moving sense of community and reverence, accompanied by well-executed musical accompaniment provided by the talented musicians and composers who make Lourdes their home, at least for part of the year. Religious processions have been an essential component of Catholic liturgical and devotional life since early Christianity. Processions allow for multiple theological and pastoral elements. Primarily, they publicly witness to the faith of the Christian community: Eucharistic processions create a visible spectacle attesting to belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist; Marian processions manifest a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and very physicality of procession speaks to the Church journeying towards eternal life (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2001). In this chapter, we will look at: Eucharistic processions and Marian processions—with particular attention to their unique manifestation at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, where both traditions have flourished since the nineteenth century.

Theological foundations of Catholic processions

Biblical and Patristic roots

The basis of religious processions has roots in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, we read of numerous processional liturgies, such as those in connection with the Temple in Jerusalem. The Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120–134) were written to accompany pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the major festivals, and Psalm 118 was recited during processional liturgies at the Feast of Tabernacles (Harrelson, 1990). The Talmud describes how devotees would process around the altar holding willow branches whilst singing liturgical refrains, which sets a precedent for combining movement, prayer, and the involvement of sacred objects in worship right up to the present day.

The most striking procession we encounter in the New Testament is Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, with the crowds crying 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (Matthew 21:9). As a clear precursor to the Eucharistic procession, we see the faithful accompanying Jesus through public spaces, bringing together the sacred and the profane. Later, St Paul uses processional imagery to describe the Christian life marked by a God who 'always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:14).

The early Church Fathers attest to the presence of processions within their culture; for example, both St Basil the Great and St Ambrose of Milan refer to the longstanding tradition of processions, accompanied by singing (Bradshaw, 2002). St John Chrysostom frequently refers to processions taking place during major feasts such as Easter and commemorations

for martyrs in his *Homilies on the Statues* delivered in Antioch. St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) writes of similar processions in North Africa in his *Sermons* and *City of God* (Augustine, 1998).

The theological significance of processions

The *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* explains that processions serve as 'a sign of the Church's condition, the pilgrimage of the People of God, with Christ and after Christ, aware that in this world it has no lasting dwelling' (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2001:247). This reflects the scriptural teaching that Christians are 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth' (Hebrews 11:13), journeying towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

Secondly, processions function as 'a sign of the witness to the faith that every Christian community is obliged to give to the Lord in the structures of civil society' (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2001: 247). In an increasingly secularised world where religious expression is increasingly privatised, public processions constitute a counter-cultural statement of the social dimension of faith and the centrality of Christ in all aspects of human existence.

Thirdly, processions realise 'the Church's missionary task which reaches back to her origins and the Lord's command' to proclaim the Gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19–20). By displaying symbols in public spaces, this not only disrupts the binary separation of the sacred and the profane but also invites those outside her visible boundaries to encounter Christ and his Mother.

Eucharistic Processions: History and Development

Medieval origins and the Feast of Corpus Christi

Notwithstanding the ancient provenance of processions as explained above, the Eucharistic procession, as practised in Lourdes and in many other settings across the globe, and characterised by the carrying of the consecrated Host through public spaces, is specifically associated with the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi in the thirteenth century. The feast originated through the mystical experiences of St Juliana of Mont Cornillon (1192–1258), a Belgian Augustinian nun who had a vision of a full moon with a darkened spot, which Christ showed her as representing the absence of a liturgical feast honouring the Blessed Sacrament (Rubin, 1991).

When Juliana shared her vision with Jacques Pantaléon, the Archdeacon of Liège, he took this forward and in 1246, Bishop Robert de Thourotte of Liège instituted the feast for his diocese. When Pantaléon was elected Pope Urban IV in 1261, he extended the feast to the universal Church through the papal bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo* (1264). The decree was

confirmed by Pope Clement V at the Council of Vienne (1311–1312) and further promulgated by Pope John XXII in 1317 (Miri Rubin, 1991).

Pope Urban IV commissioned no less a scholar than Thomas Aquinas to compose the liturgical office for the feast, which produced some of the Church's most profound and long-lasting hymns, including *Pange Lingua Gloriosi*, *Tantum Ergo*, and *O Salutaris Hostia*. These texts reflect the Thomistic understanding of the Real Presence and transubstantiation, as recently defined by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

The first documented Eucharistic procession occurred in Cologne, Germany, in the 1270s (Palazzo, 2014), but by the fourteenth century, the practice of processing with the Blessed Sacrament on Corpus Christi had been adopted throughout Europe. In urban settings, through city streets, in the countryside, they negotiated fields, often pausing at four outdoor altars where one of the four Gospels would be proclaimed, followed by prayers and concluding with the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Reformation Controversy and Counter-Reformation response

The Protestant Reformation presented substantial challenges to Eucharistic devotion. While reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin personally upheld traditional doctrines concerning Mary's virginity and sinlessness, they regarded Catholic Eucharistic practices—particularly processions and adoration—as competing with Christ's exclusive mediatory role (McGrath, 2013). The reformers' emphasis on *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* prompted them to reject what they perceived as 'superstitious' practices not explicitly referenced in Scripture.

Andreas Karlstadt, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin called for the removal of religious images and devotional practices, citing the Decalogue's prohibition of graven images. Major iconoclastic movements were witnessed in Zürich (1523), Copenhagen (1530), Münster (1534), Geneva (1535), and Augsburg (1537), leaving much religious art, as well as the ornaments used in processions, either damaged or destroyed (Eire, 1986).

The Church’s response came in the form of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) which roundly condemned Protestant challenges regarding Eucharistic doctrine. In its decree on the Eucharist (1551), the Council explicitly stated that 'the Most Blessed Sacrament is to be honoured with extraordinary festive celebrations and solemnly carried from place to place in processions according to the praiseworthy universal rite and custom of the holy Church' (Council of Trent, 1551, Session 13). This teaching reaffirms the legitimacy and significance of Eucharistic processions as suitable manifestations of faith in the Real Presence.

The post-Tridentine period experienced a resurgence of Eucharistic devotion, exemplified by increasingly elaborate Corpus Christi processions. During the Baroque era, these processions sometimes integrated additional liturgical elements, including floats portraying various

religious scenes. Ecclesiastical authorities occasionally found it necessary to redirect attention towards the Eucharistic focus of these celebrations (Schillebeeckx, 1968).

Contemporary pratice and canonical norms

The Second Vatican Council maintained the Church's traditional teaching whilst encouraging its integration with contemporary liturgical principles. Canon 944 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* states: 'When it can be done in the judgement of the diocesan bishop, as a public witness of the veneration toward the Most Holy Eucharist, a procession is to be conducted through the public streets, especially on the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ' (Canon 944).

The *Ceremonial of Bishops* characterises Corpus Christi processions as 'desirable' and offers detailed rubrics for their observance (Congregation for Divine Worship, 1985: 386). The ritual manual *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* stipulates that processions should typically proceed from one church to another, although they may return to their original point if necessary. Processions confined solely within a church building are now prohibited, underscoring the communal witness aspect of the tradition (Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, 1973).

Marian Processions: theology and development

Mariological foundations

The Flambeau, or Torchlight Procession, is, for many pilgrims in Lourdes, the striking conclusion to the day, with the sight of candles burning along the esplanade and the lit statue of Our Lady being carried aloft. The theological basis for such processions is the Catholic understanding of Mary's unique role in salvation history and her continuing intercession in prayer. The Second Council of Nicaea (787) established a three-level hierarchy of worship: *latria* (adoration) is due to God alone; *hyperdulia* (special veneration) is appropriate for Mary as the Mother of God; and *dulia* (veneration) is given to the saints (Tanner, 1990). Marian processions express *hyperdulia*, honouring Mary's singular dignity without compromising the worship due to God alone, an understanding that can be challenging for Christians of other traditions, where this approach is not the norm.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* places Marian devotion within the broader scope of popular piety: 'The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church's sacramental life, such as the veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc.' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1679). The Church 'fosters authentic forms of popular piety' while ensuring they remain properly oriented towards Christ and are coherently integrated with sacramental life.

Historical development and cultural expressions

Marian processions developed organically throughout Christian history, often associated with particular feast days, apparitions, or local devotions. The medieval period saw significant growth in Marian devotion, with processions becoming familiar during the month of May and on major Marian feasts such as the Annunciation (25 March), the Assumption (15 August), and the Immaculate Conception (8 December).

The Baroque period witnessed particularly elaborate expressions of Marian piety, including colourful processions featuring confraternities, civic authorities, and other dignitaries. These processions often drew on local cultural traditions to create a rich diversity of expression, unified by a shared sense of meaning and common Mariological themes (Carroll, 1986). In Spain, France, Italy, Austria, and Bavaria, Marian processions became embedded as religious and civic events, with some traditions continuing to the present day.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, May processions were common, with parishes organising processions with children dressed in white, escorting a statue of Mary through the local community, often concluding with a 'May crowning' ceremony with a young girl, chosen as 'May Queen'. These processions served important catechetical and community-building functions, particularly in immigrant Catholic communities seeking their own identity (Dolan, 1985).

Post-Conciliar developments

The decades following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) saw a notable decline in traditional devotional customs, including Marian processions, across many Western nations. This reduction was attributable to various factors: liturgical reforms that underscored the significance of the Eucharist, ecumenical sensitivities concerning practices deemed problematic by Protestants, and wider cultural transformations linked to secularisation and the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s (Chinnici, 1996).

Sadly, many who thought they understood the significance of the Second Vatican Council had either not read the documents, nor understood how the Council sat within, not apart from the multi-century journey of the pilgrim Church. The Council itself strongly affirmed the value of Marian devotion. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* devoted its eighth chapter to 'The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church', carefully locating Mariology within Christology and ecclesiology. Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1974) offered guidance for renewing Marian devotion in accord with conciliar principles, explicitly affirming the value of processions when properly celebrated.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional devotional practices, including Marian processions. Pope John Paul II's profound Marian devotion, expressed in

his papal motto *Totus Tuus* ('Totally Yours'), and his apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002) encouraged renewed appreciation for Marian piety. For many younger people, there is a real desire to discover for the first time the treasury of the faith which, for nearly two generations, appeared to some to have been eroded, either through neglect or even hostility, most often from within the Church. Contemporary initiatives, such as the Grand Marian Procession inaugurated in Los Angeles in 2011, demonstrate the continuing vitality of this tradition (Queen of Angels Foundation, 2011).

The Processions of Lourdes: A Unique Synthesis

The Marian Context: The Apparitions of 1858

The processions at Lourdes should be seen within the context of the Marian apparitions to Saint Bernadette Soubirous. Between 11 February and 16 July 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared eighteen times to the fourteen-year-old peasant girl at the Grotto of Massabielle on the banks of the river Gave (Uttley, 2025). During these apparitions, ‘the lady’ identified herself as 'the Immaculate Conception,' thereby confirming the dogma proclaimed by Pope Pius IX four years earlier (1854). ‘The lady’, subsequently conformed as the Mother of God directed Bernadette to 'Go and tell the priests that people should come here in procession' and to 'have a chapel built here' (Harris, 1999).

This explicit request for processions notably differentiates Lourdes from numerous other Marian apparition sites. Mary's instruction established processional devotion as an essential component of the shrine's identity from its inception. Bishop Laurence of Tarbes formally recognised the supernatural nature of the apparitions in 1862, and the sanctuary quickly evolved into one of the foremost pilgrimage destinations within Catholicism. (Kaufman, 2005)

The Marian Torchlight Procession

The Marian procession, also known as the torchlight procession, has been conducted at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes since 1872. The tradition of candle-bearing during the procession has antecedents dating back to an earlier period: during the third apparition on 18 February 1858, one of Bernadette's companions carried a candle to the grotto, and thereafter, Bernadette herself consistently brought a candle to her encounters with the Virgin (Harris, 1999).

The formal establishment of the torchlight procession is attributed to Father Marie-Antoine, a Capuchin friar known as the 'Saint of Toulouse', who introduced the practice in 1863. The procession was regularised and became a daily occurrence from 1872 onwards (Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes, 2024). The procession takes place each evening at 9:00 p.m. from

Easter to the 1st November, embodying Mary's request for people to 'come here in procession'.

The procession adheres to a designated route, commencing at the Grotto and advancing along the esplanade to culminate at the square before the Rosary Basilica. Pilgrims carry candles safeguarded by paper windguards inscribed with the Ave Maria of Lourdes, forming a procession of light that has become one of the most emblematic images of the sanctuary. A replica of the Cabuchet statue of Our Lady of Lourdes is borne at the front of the procession, accompanied by pilgrimage banners from groups representing various nations, regions and pilgrimage groups.

The spiritual focus of the torchlight procession is the Holy Rosary. As pilgrims process, they recite the appropriate mysteries according to the day of the week: the Joyful Mysteries on Mondays and Saturdays, the Sorrowful Mysteries on Tuesdays and Fridays, the Glorious Mysteries on Sundays and Wednesdays, and the Luminous Mysteries on Thursdays. Brief meditations in multiple languages introduce each decade, preventing the prayers from becoming merely rote recitation. The Ave Maria is sung in numerous languages, creating a powerful expression of the Church's universality (Lourdes France, 2024).

The procession culminates with the singing of the Lourdes Hymn with verses in different languages, followed by prayers of intercession and the *Laudate Mariam*. Bishops and priests present impart blessings upon the assembled pilgrims, and participants exchange the sign of peace before departing. The ceremony beautifully embodies the *communio sanctorum*—the communion of saints—as Christians from every continent unite in prayer to the Mother of God.

The Eucharistic procession: Development and significance

While the Marian procession responded directly to Our Lady's request, the Eucharistic procession at Lourdes was established somewhat later, in 1874. The procession gained particular significance following events on 22 August 1888, when the first blessing of the sick with the Blessed Sacrament took place during a procession. During this event, Pierre Delanoy, who suffered from ataxia, experienced instantaneous healing as the monstrance passed by. This event represented the first documented Eucharistic miracle at Lourdes and marked a pivotal moment in the devotional life of the sanctuary (Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association, 2006).

Following 1888, the proportion of miraculous healings occurring during the Eucharistic procession increased dramatically. Medical documentation from the period shows that cures at the passing of the Blessed Sacrament rose from one-sixth of total healings to eventually exceed sixty per cent by 1898. Dr Boissarie, president of the Lourdes Medical Bureau, noted that 'for ten or twelve years, the great rendezvous where the deepest homage has been paid to the Eucharist is Lourdes' (Boissarie, cited in *Les Miracles*

historiques du Saint Sacrement). These manifestations powerfully demonstrated Catholic teaching on the Real Presence and reinforced the connection between Eucharistic devotion and divine healing (Boissarie, 1907).

The modern-day Eucharistic procession takes place daily at 5:00 p.m. from 25 March (the Feast of the Annunciation) to the 1st November (All Saints' Day). The procession begins at the podium on the prairie (meadow) of the sanctuary and processes across the esplanade to conclude at the underground Basilica of St Pius X. Before processing, the presiding priest proclaims, 'Let us walk with the Lord since He walks with us', encapsulating the theological understanding of processions as mutual accompaniment—Christ accompanying his people and his people following Christ (Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes, 2025).

The *malades* (sick pilgrims) occupy a position of honour, being assisted by volunteers and positioned at the forefront of the procession and assembly. This arrangement signifies Jesus' preferential concern for the sick and suffering, as well as their special entitlement to his healing power. The priest bears the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance, protected by a humeral veil, with a canopy held overhead by attendants. The procession is illuminated by candles and incense, accompanied by hymns of praise sung in multiple languages.

Upon reaching the basilica, the procession concludes with a period of Eucharistic adoration and the blessing of the sick. St Bernadette herself testified to the power of Eucharistic devotion, stating that 'The Eucharist bathes the tormented soul in light and love' (cited in Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes, 2025). This declaration, born from her own profound experiences at Lourdes, articulates the transformative potential that the Church perceives in prayerful encounter with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

Theological synthesis: Mary and the Eucharist at Lourdes

The dual tradition of Marian and Eucharistic processions at Lourdes embodies profound theological truths about the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist. Mary's request for processions finds its ultimate fulfilment not merely in Marian processions but in processions that honour her Son present in the Blessed Sacrament. As the priest-author of *Les Miracles historiques du Saint Sacrement* observed: 'It is Mary at Lourdes who has really prepared the Eucharistic triumph of Her Son' (cited in Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association, 2006).

This relationship reflects the Christocentric nature of authentic Marian devotion. Mary's role is always to lead the faithful to Christ, as she did at the wedding feast of Cana when she instructed the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). The Second Vatican Council taught that Mary 'shines forth... as a model of virtues to the whole community of the elect' and that devotion to her 'differs essentially from the worship of adoration which is offered to the incarnate Word... it greatly fosters this worship' (*Lumen Gentium*, 66–67, 1964).

The processions at Lourdes also show the ecclesiological dimension of both Marian and Eucharistic devotion. The Church processes as a pilgrim people, united around the Eucharistic Lord and under the maternal care of Mary. The presence of pilgrims from every continent, praying in numerous languages yet united in common faith, serves as a visible sign of the Church's catholicity. The prominent place accorded to the sick recalls that the Church is, in Pope Francis's memorable phrase, 'a field hospital', existing primarily to minister to the wounded and broken.

Furthermore, the processions at Lourdes exemplify the integration of sacramental and popular piety that characterised authentic Catholic spirituality prior to the emergence of rationalist tendencies, which at times separated these dimensions. These processions are not substitutes for the Mass but rather extensions of the Eucharistic celebration. worship and complements to the sacramental encounter. They create spaces where formal liturgy and popular devotion interpenetrate, where prayer is simultaneously personal and communal, contemplative and active.

Conclusion

Eucharistic and Marian processions represent enduring manifestations of Catholic devotion that integrate biblical precedents, patristic customs, medieval developments, and contemporary revitalisation. These processions fulfil multiple theological objectives: they serve as public attestations to the faith in the Real Presence and veneration of the Mother of God; they symbolise the pilgrim character of the Church's journey toward eternal life; and they function as evangelistic acts through the visible demonstration of Christian belief in an increasingly secular public sphere.

The processions at Lourdes embody a distinctive integration of these traditions, grounded in the explicit guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary and cultivated over nearly two centuries of devotional observance. The nightly torchlight procession, characterized by its streams of candlelight and multilingual prayers, along with the daily Eucharistic procession, emphasizing the sick and the demonstration of Christ's healing power, have established themselves as hallmark features of the Lourdes pilgrimage experience.

In an era marked by the escalating privatization of religion and the decline of public expressions of faith, the processions at Lourdes and similar devotions across the Catholic world serve as a counter-cultural testament to the social and communal facets of Christianity. They reaffirm to modern believers that faith is not solely a private sentiment but a truth to be proclaimed, celebrated, and practiced publicly.

The healing miracles associated particularly with the Eucharistic procession at Lourdes serve as signs of God's continuing activity in the world and as invitations to deeper faith. They

recall Jesus' promise that 'these signs will accompany those who believe' (Mark 16:17) and demonstrate that the age of miracles has not passed. These extraordinary manifestations of divine power simultaneously remind believers that God's healing encompasses not only physical restoration but spiritual transformation, the ultimate healing being conversion of heart and reconciliation with God.

Ultimately, the processions at Lourdes exemplify the profound interconnection between Christology, ecclesiology, and Mariology that characterises Catholic theology at its richest. Mary guides the faithful to her Son; Christ heals and blesses His followers; and the Church proceeds as a pilgrim people, journeying through this world toward the heavenly Jerusalem. In this sacred movement of prayer, song, and communal devotion, the mystery of salvation history is renewed, and pilgrims encounter both the Mother of God and the Eucharistic Lord who is 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6).

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