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What Is It Like to Receive the Eucharist in Space?

A Conversation With NASA Astronaut and Catholic Convert Mike Hopkins



Mike Hopkins shows what life is like in space. (photo: NASA)

Getting to live in space is a challenge and an honor only a very few people will ever enjoy (at least in our generation). Astronaut **Mike Hopkins** is one of those selected few. He spent six months on the International Space Station (ISS) in 2013. And though he was thrilled when he was chosen for a space mission, there was one Person he didn't want to leave behind: Jesus in the Eucharist.

Hopkins had been received into the Church less than a year before his launch. After a long wait, he was finally able to receive Our Lord at each Mass. Facing the prospect of being off the planet for half a year, he decided he had to find out if Jesus could travel with him. It turns out he could — and he did.

The Register spoke with Hopkins about his desire to have the Eucharist in space, how it worked out practically, and what led to his devotion to the Real Presence.

How is it that you ended up being the kind of astronaut who wants to take Jesus into space?

Well, it's a bit of a long story. I grew up as a non-practicing Methodist. I met my wife, Julie, in college. She's Catholic, and we started dating and eventually ended up getting married. As part of that process of getting married in the Catholic Church, we agreed to raise our kids Catholic. I didn't have any intentions of becoming Catholic. I felt like it was important for our kids to realize that what was important was their relationship with God, not necessarily whether you're Methodist or Catholic or Protestant or whatever the case may be.

And so, we went to church on a regular basis, to the Catholic church. Our kids were born and baptized Catholic, and we've been raising them in the Catholic Church.

Then I got — in 2009 — selected as an astronaut. And this had been a goal, a dream, an objective for much of my professional career. So, everything was fantastic, right? We moved down to Houston and became members of Mary Queen Catholic Church here in Friendswood,

one of the local parishes. I went through the basic [astronaut] training from 2009 to 2011. And as far as my religious practice, everything was still kind of the same. We were going to the Catholic church, the boys were going to the Catholic youth education programs and being raised Catholic, and yet, when we went to church, I didn't participate in Communion because I wasn't a Catholic.

And then, in 2011, I got assigned to a mission to the International Space Station. I was going to go up and spend six months in space, starting in 2013, so you'd think as far as career goals and family, everything was perfect. I'd become an astronaut. I'd been assigned to actually go into space. My family was doing fantastic. And so everything was good, but, for me personally, I felt like something was missing.

It was hard to put my finger on it, but I eventually decided that "I think maybe I need to become Catholic. I want to participate more in my family's — my wife and my kids' — religious life." I do believe that God has a way of putting people in your life that help you when you have the need. In this case, for me, it was Father Skip Negley, who was the priest at Mary Queen.

At this time, as I'd been assigned to a mission, I was training a lot, which meant I was spending a lot of time in Russia. Therefore, I wasn't able to attend the weekly RCIA classes. And so we [my wife and I] went and talked to Father Skip, and he said, "Look Mike, I'm willing — when you're here for the two- or three-week [intervals], we'll get together one-on-one as often as we can. And we'll do it in that fashion."

So, it would never have happened without Father Skip. Or it would have been, I guess, a much bigger struggle or a much longer process, if Father Skip hadn't taken me under his wing.

I remember one of the first meetings I had with him: [He asked], "Why do you want to be Catholic?"

And I gave the response I mentioned earlier — about wanting to participate more in my family's religious life — and he said, "Mike, that's not a reason to be Catholic."

And so that whole process of these meetings with him was absolutely fantastic for me, because it answered a lot of questions that I had about the Catholic faith. Father Skip was just amazing. And at the end of the day, I realized it was something I needed to do *for me*.

I was able to get confirmed in the Catholic Church in December 2012, and I was launching in September 2013.

Once I got confirmed though, I have to admit, I still wasn't quite satisfied — because I knew I was going to be gone [in space] for six months.

So, I started asking the question, "Is there any chance I can take the Eucharist up with me into space?"

Which isn't something that, you know, is normally done, since you don't self-administer Communion.

Again, God has a way of putting people in your life when there is a need. And Chuck Turner [a deacon as well as the parish facilities manager] and Father Jim [Kuczynski], who had taken over from Father Skip, started asking the questions of the archdiocese: "What would we need to do to allow Mike to take the Eucharist up?" So they really did a lot of the leg work to make it happen,

and I was able to take a small pyx up with me that had six wafers divided into four each, so I had 24 opportunities to receive Communion on orbit.

They were able to work it all out with the church; and so, the weekend before I left for Russia — we launch on a Russian rocket from Kazakhstan — I went to Mass one last time, and [the priest] consecrated the wafers into the Body of Christ, and I was able to take the pyx with me.

And this is where, again, the whole process was incredible because every item that we take into space has to be documented and categorized. So, when you're launching on this Russian vehicle, all of these personal items [are processed] — members of the Russian Space Agency take about two weeks to weigh and validate [them] for space flight. Well, I couldn't just give up the Body of Christ — just hand it over to somebody else!

Yet the Russians were amazing. I went in with all my personal items, and I explained what the pyx was and the meaning of it to me — because for them, they, of course, saw it just as bread, if you will, the wafers — and yet for me [I knew] it was the Body of Christ. And they completely understood and said, “Okay, we'll estimate it weighs this much, and no problem. You can keep it with you.”

So, it was just one thing after another: All these doors opened up, and I was able to take the Eucharist up — and I was able to have Communion, basically, every week. There were a couple of times when I received Communion on, I'll say, special occasions: I did two spacewalks; so on the morning of both of those days, when I went out for the spacewalk, I had Communion. It was really helpful for me to know that Jesus was with me when I went out the hatch into the vacuum of space. And then I received my last Communion on my last day on orbit in the “Cupola,” which is this large window that looks down at the Earth, and that was a very special moment before I came home.

Was there a particular point in your conversion trajectory that you came to faith in the Eucharist, when you came to realize, “Wow — this really is Jesus”?

Yes, I think so. I mentioned that Father Skip — we spent all this time together during my confirmation process — explained the very beginnings of the Church and how Catholic priests have this lineage going all the way back to the apostles; how there is this connection, through the Catholic Church, to Jesus, through the priests. There was something about that that made it all seem real to me. Because when you're talking [to a priest], in my case to Father Skip, and realize that there's a direct link between his being ordained all the way down to the apostles, to Jesus ... that kind of connection made it all real.

How has NASA, a very scientific entity, responded to your conversion and taking the Eucharist into space?

NASA has been great. ... They didn't have any reservations about me taking the Eucharist up or to practicing my faith on orbit. Of course, I'm there with a job to do, and I have to do that, but there was no interference. There are quite a few astronauts who are very religious. We are practicing our faith. We're not silent about that.

Do you think that being an astronaut helps your faith?

It does. When I receive Communion ... it's one of these things that puts things in perspective for me. When you're in orbit, and you're getting ready to go out on a spacewalk, from an emotional standpoint, you can be very nervous. You can be afraid, if you will. So, it helped strengthen my

faith, because when I was able to receive the Host and realize that if my faith is strong, I have nothing to be afraid of ... that helped. Having that constant reminder when I was on the ISS — things can go wrong in a hurry up there, and the consequences can be quite bad — [I had] my faith, and that constant leaning on Jesus, and realizing that he's in control, that I'm not in control of this. So, when you're sitting on that rocket getting ready to launch, you say a prayer and get the job done.

I have got to tell you this is probably the hardest topic for me to talk about. For me, my relationship with God was always a very personal thing. That's one of the things I learned with Father Skip. [The Church is] catholic; it's a body; it's the whole. That is part of the faith. It's not just about your personal [situation]; it's also being part of the community. I spent my entire life kind of keeping my thoughts and beliefs internal, so now being in this position of communicating, I know I don't communicate it very well. ... It is very difficult for me. It's much easier to stand up and talk about a space launch or the science we're doing on board.

You speak very beautifully about this. My oldest son is 7, and I told him, "I'm going to interview an astronaut!" And he was like, "Oh, cool!" And then I told him why: "Because he took Jesus into space!" You have a beautiful ministry now and a beautiful mission in the Church. My last question is: What do you imagine heaven to be like?

When I think of heaven, I don't think of being in space, because I've been there, and I know what it's like. And there's a lot of it that is like life down here. We've created this artificial environment up there. We've built the ISS. It is man-made. It has all of the same kinds of things we have down here on Earth. You have exercise equipment. You have food. You have ways to prepare that food. You have the means of getting rid of the waste. You have science. You get up there, and it's very real. When I think of heaven, I have no idea what that is going to be like.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share? You're still just a baby Catholic — or a toddler Catholic!

I am! I am!

My youngest son is going through the confirmation process. Julie and I went to the kickoff meeting. They had a guest speaker there, not a priest ... [he was] from one of the adult faith-formation programs from the north side of town, and this guy was good. It is amazing when you get to hear someone talk about faith [in a real way], talk about the shortcomings in our practice of the faith. The way he talked was truly incredible.

I think one of the neat things about becoming Catholic is getting to participate in events like that, where you realize that "I am a baby Catholic, and I have so much more to learn." And every time I get around these amazing people who are in the Catholic Church, I just realize again and again that this is the right place for me.

*Kathleen Naab March 5, 2017
writes from Houston.*

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