

Theological Trends

Eucharist or communion service?

Thomas O'Loughlin

RECENTLY A SMALL, MISSAL-SHAPED BOOKLET appeared from the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales setting out the ritual for Communion Services in the absence of a priest.¹ That its advent – unthinkable only decades ago – was not marked by fanfare is wholly explicable. First, the liturgy it sets out is unremarkable. It follows closely the Latin model for such liturgies published in 1988. Moreover, its shape follows the general pattern established after Vatican II of a Liturgy of the Word followed by a specific rite. Second, such ceremonies are already common in many parishes on weekdays and have been used widely on the continent on Sundays for many years. That it would appear here was but a matter of time. Third, the quiet appearance is due in some part to a certain embarrassment and sadness on the part of the hierarchy: not being able to provide Sunday mass for people is somehow felt as a failure, or at least a sad turn of events as we approach the end of the second Christian millennium. Indeed, I have heard of at least one bishop who has let it be known that this new ritual is not to be used in his diocese on Sundays without his express permission. The shortage of priests may have been creeping up on dioceses for years, but somehow acknowledging this by replacing the Sunday eucharist is a defining moment requiring an explicit exercise of oversight!

A theological trend?

To many these changes are simply matters of either liturgy or canon law. However, given the unique place of the eucharist in Catholic theology, and especially the developments in the theology of the eucharist since Vatican II, that a communion service in lieu of the eucharist – for whatever reason – is now being put forward for actual practice is surely a reflection of some important trends in the operative theology of the Church's hierarchy. On the one hand, that we have this liturgy, at all, can be seen as a product of the developments in the 1960s. On the other hand, the notion that the assembly of particular churches on Sundays for the eucharist can be replaced

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by receiving communion (albeit as an exception) is built on an earlier theology that could divide 'sacrifice' and 'sacrament' and which has been explicitly superseded in both theology and praxis. This surely calls for reflection on the trends it indicates.

However, it might be argued that in this reflection there is nothing left to be said. Many have pointed to the fact that the Church should not be deprived of the eucharist simply because of a clergy shortage which could be solved by ordaining men who have proven leadership skills in actual communities, but might not be canonically suitable (i.e. they are married, or unwilling to accept celibacy as a condition of ordination). Likewise, several have noted that replacing the community's breaking of the bread with 'getting communion' fosters a legalistic individualism which misses some of our central beliefs about what we are doing, and returns us to a 'things' model of the sacraments.

By contrast, responding to these suggestions have come Roman replies which seem to grow in their certainty as to the impossibility of any change in the requirements for presbyteral ordination. Moreover, that damage might be done to other aspects of the sacramental life of Christians by this 'defence of the priesthood' seems hardly to bother them. So why waste paper rehearsing the arguments? Any theology concerning questions of Church must be related to the life of the actual historical Church and the living beings who are the real members of Christ by baptism. Thus when an event takes place that affects real communities in England and Wales today, then a theologian there must reflect on the significance of the event or fail in one of his or her duties. Moreover, the theologian is someone who not only discovers new things in the mystery of Christ, but also acts as a conscientious memory for the community, reminding people that their well-intentioned decisions may not represent the whole situation. There are those in the Church today who declare that there are no inherent problems with our current praxis for the priesthood. For example, they look upon it as a quasi-professional group, with a distinct *esprit de corps* and a distinctive celibate life-style, and they have a strong tendency to see it as existing as a 'vocation' analogous to a religious vocation. But if the theologian does not rehearse the other aspects of the question when these issues naturally arise, as now with this publication, then he or she has failed in the task of being a critical researcher within the Church's memory.

No priest, therefore no eucharist

Substitutes for the eucharist on Sunday are not new. Indeed, the idea that a community could be deprived of the eucharist owing to the lack of a priest can be traced to the mid-sixteenth century. In places where priests could not operate because of persecution the usual substitute was a recitation of the rosary. The same practice obtained in other places where there was a shortage of priests, either for geographical or for financial reasons, such as on the 'missions', and especially among communities of emigrants during the great migrations of the last two centuries. Indeed, the present pope pointed to this practice in emphasizing the need for priests in his first Holy Thursday letter to priests in 1979: people gathered saying the rosary and looking at a stole to remind them of what they lacked. These shortages, and the substitutions for the eucharist they involved, are familiar to many; they were, and still are, cited in appeals for volunteers to the priesthood. Campaigns for missionaries have long tried to persuade young men to 'join up' with stories of giant parishes where the priest only comes 'once every so-many weeks' while the rest of the time they have 'only catechists'. The message is clear: the eucharist is a function of the priesthood; the priest is the unique element in the gathering; no priest, no mass.

It has been frequently noted, especially in North America in the early nineteenth century, that this shortage of priests is clearly detrimental to the whole life of faith. In the 1830s Bishop England of Charleston pointed out that there was enormous 'leakage' among Catholic immigrants because of the lack of priests and the unavailability of the mass. From the perspective of Vatican II's statement, that the eucharist is 'the centre and high point of the Christian life', and our increasing awareness of the intimate links between gathering for the Lord's Supper and our Christian identity, we could analyse England's pleas about 'leakage' as indicating that people without a eucharistic centre to their practice just drifted away as there was no *adequate* community to hold them. England's argument was that without priests people lacked preaching and organization, and so lost their faith. It was a staffing problem to be solved by building seminaries and importing priests from Europe.

The case of those emigrant missions – and they can be replicated around the world today – shows there is general agreement on one point: whether one primarily notes a shortage of priests or the absence of the eucharist, this is an unhealthy state of affairs, and

one detrimental to the life of the Church. Disagreement arises in the next stage of the analysis.

Priest or eucharist as the centre of a community's life?

Is the decay of a particular church a function of not having a priest (a hierarch as such) or a consequence of being deprived of the central sacramental mystery, the eucharist? If one opts for the former, then the Church's mystery is vested in a sacred minister who by his actions brings about the Church. If the latter, then the Church is the mystery of communion of the baptized, and as the baptized they have a need to participate in the eucharistic sacrifice to bring their communion to perfection. Here lies the crux of the debate over the priesthood: does one keep one's eye fixed on the priest or on the eucharist as the focus of the community? One can conceive of an ideal situation where this question of priority does not arise, but in the real Church one or other position has always been the starting point.

Since the Council of Trent the answer has been that one must have a suitable priest. Then one has someone to send to a community, and then they will have the eucharist. So, get more priests! Consequently one needs a description of what a priest should be. These criteria then become the basic demands for the solution to the problem of providing the eucharist. So one seeks men with three qualifications: first, one who is prepared to be celibate, since there is a long-standing link between celibacy and the demands of 'the way of perfection'; second, one with the necessary education for the tasks traditionally linked to priesthood; and third, one who will be a full-time minister of religion identified with a social group who have a strong corporate sense as clergy. This is the agenda that produces a clergy-centred Church, and it has long been at the core of evangelization and administrative concern.

The alternative focus is the eucharist. This begins with the fundamental fact of what Jesus did with the disciples and what they did with the churches they gathered around them in imitation of him (cf. 1 Cor 11:23). The tradition of this factual starting point expresses itself in written form in the command 'Do this in memory of me' in Paul and Luke. Now the eucharist is central to the Christian life, and its establishment is what calls forth the person who acts in Christ as its president. The rationale of this situation is this: if you have a group of disciples, then they need to share the eucharist to

become a church and to be united with the Church.² This means their having a president, and this involves the Church in ensuring that there is such in that community.

The historical shift from eucharist to cleric as focus

We find the eucharistic focus (if there is a group, ensure it has a priest) as the practice from the late first or early second century. When Luke imagined the earliest Pauline communities he did so assuming the practices of his own time. Thus Paul passing through communities of Christians makes sure to 'appoint presbyters' (Acts 14:23), and Luke thinks of these as presiders at the eucharist.³ In this light we should understand the statements in the pastoral epistles (eg Tit 1:5-7 and 1 Tim 3) as guidelines for choosing a suitable member of a community to provide it with this ministry. This situation continued, in more organized ways, into the later times where *de facto* there arose a two-tier priesthood: those in religious orders or associated with the Church's urban administration, and those who provided pastoral care in the countryside where the majority of the population lived. These priests were often laughed at for their lack of learning, as they had to have short simple homilies written for them; later they were chided for their 'sinfulness' – because they were not celibates. But these criticisms are wholly unjust, coming from those who had 'made it' to university, without necessarily becoming good pastors themselves. Moreover, pre-packed homilies are not unknown even today (the medieval ones seem to have been more effective). And, finally, after the rise of the cult of celibacy bishops knew they should use Nelson's other eye on rural visitations lest they leave a particular church without mass.⁴

The practice by which the majority of priests were closely linked to the community they served died out in the sixteenth century. The Reformers emphasized preaching – hence formal education. Princes justified 'reforming' the Church (to the glory of their exchequers) as it was full of uneducated and superstitious country clergy. The Catholics could hardly object as these were the condemnations 'zealous' bishops had already made! Thus Trent sought to outdo the critics, and as the Reformers doubted priesthood and denied celibacy, these now became the core around which all else was organized. However, since criticisms of those country clergy are still sometimes heard, we should note that, though largely invisible to history, they were good men, who lived and died with their people.

They could not flee either famine or pestilence, and they provided the sacraments for their people for a pittance – the dues went to the absent cleric (always celibate, sometimes not in priest's orders, and often at a university) who owned the living. Only a few of these priests are visible to us, e.g. William Langland, but they surely form one of the largest cohorts of the *apostolorum chorus*.

This idea, that it is the need for the eucharist which produces the priest, has survived the changes of the sixteenth century in the common understanding of the Church in several ways. Theological manuals found the 'dominical mandate' for Order in *Hoc facite*, the words of the institution narrative. The priesthood was thus established with the eucharist. Likewise the Holy Thursday liturgy continued to link the priesthood's origins to that of the eucharist. It also survived in the monastic practice of ordaining monks as they were needed for the celebration of mass. This practice was often incomprehensible to those brought up with the Tridentine model – a young man wanted to be a priest and that was an end in itself – and so it frequently broke down and most monks were ordained. But the memory of the practice retained the older awareness that it is the need for the eucharist that produces the need for the priest.

Today when we contemplate not having the Sunday eucharist, the bishops – whose responsibility it is to provide particular churches with the priests they need to live the life Christ wishes of them – must ask themselves this question: the priesthood or the eucharist, which is the primary reality?

The sources of the impasse

Despite the problems caused by shortages of priests among emigrants or on the missions, no one suggested changing the external structure of the priesthood from that of full-time clerics to that of ordaining suitable men as needed. Equally today, the topic is taboo for many in the hierarchy. This failure to think the problem through to its essential elements – it is not a failure to think laterally – is interesting as it reveals part of the operative theology beneath the proposed communion services.

That you must have a priest for mass (i.e. no priest equals no mass), and therefore eucharist is a function of the priesthood, is a fairly common piece of reasoning. Moreover it seems solid, if stark, reasoning in that all its premises are valid. However, it suffers from the most common weakness of scholastic method: failure to take

account of historical sequence and priority. And in a religion of historical advents, as ours is, this is a failure in basic understanding. The linearity of time is at the core of our theology of creation and redemption. There was an Alpha, the Christ has come; we await an Omega. In this situation we cannot interchange realities in their successive relationships, but must begin with facts in their true created temporal sequence. Christ gave the eucharist to the community of disciples, as a consequence of which there is the man who stands in his stead. The priesthood is secondary to the eucharist, and not vice versa. In examining situations one must always begin with the need for the eucharist, not with the availability of priests. As the greater scholastics clearly realized, the eucharist defines the priesthood, not the priesthood the eucharist.⁵

Familiarity with both Tridentine practice and scholastic-type analyses have combined to blur our perception of how inappropriate it is to restrict the availability of the eucharist to the availability of an independently defined group, the priests. However, why does this blurring continue in actual decision-making? I suggest that the answer lies in 'non-theological factors'. For those making the decisions, the priesthood is all around them: they deal with priests all the time, the clerical world is their world. Being 'a priest' becomes so much part of their identity that thinking of major shifts in the practicalities of the priesthood is humanly threatening. One *is* a priest, and then one of the things one does is 'to say mass'. Silently this order of priorities (priesthood from Christ, then mass for the people) becomes a fixed element in thinking. This is supported by the perception common in society that clergy are the Church's core, while ceremonies – mass included – are part of a job description.

Those making decisions about the future of the priesthood and the eucharist have to face two questions. First, is the experience of the current form of priesthood so much part of the immediate environment that it distorts theological judgement of the priorities of the case as these are dictated by the very acts of Christ? Second, is the pattern of behaviour which prioritizes the priesthood rather than the eucharist deflecting the attention of ordinary people from the mystery of the eucharist to the mystique of those who are brought into being as priests – not just community leaders – by that need to have a eucharistic president? It should be noted that in planning communion services rather than a change in the practicalities of priesthood, the hierarchy have answered the second question: the

priesthood's form is sacrosanct; the eucharist's form can – as one of the priesthood's functions – be reduced, as an emergency measure.

Shortage of priests versus vocations crisis

One phenomenon, widely discussed today, is the 'shortage of priests' or the 'vocations crisis': the terms are used interchangeably and considered equivalent. But are they? Particular forms of religious life, e.g. monasticism, are individual responses to the mystery of Christ and so can be called 'vocations' in the strict sense; there a crisis could exist. However, Order belongs to the Church's basic fabric. Therefore, finding suitable men to celebrate the eucharist is not a matter of an individual's sense of his personal calling, but an objective decision of the Church to find those most suited to the task, call on them, and appoint them. This is a view of the priesthood that has been revived since Vatican II, but one which we are failing to put into practice in leaving particular churches without priests. If we have a group of Christians in a place, we must trust that the Spirit has provided one of them with what it needs to preside at the eucharist. It is the Church's task to find this individual, and empower him. Failure to do so continues a false theology of ministry and reduces the priesthood to a life-path analogous to religious life for those who opt for it. It also fails to recognize the ecclesial integrity following from Christ's promise of the Spirit and of his own presence where even the smallest church is gathered. In short, a priestly 'vocations crisis' is an impossibility in Catholic ecclesiology.

'Getting communion' versus sharing in Christ's banquet

Before Vatican II not only was there a practical division between mass and communion but a theological division of sacrifice and sacrament. One of the Council's successes was to reunite these sundered parts in theory and, to some extent, in practice. Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament was to be seen as derived from the actual celebration (primarily for the sick and secondly for personal devotion). Benediction disappeared and the Council expressed a desire that bread be consecrated at the mass at which it was to be received. Yet this development is ruined when one deliberately consecrates particles for later celebrations when 'you can get what you can': a Liturgy of the Word and communion. No matter how much 'liturgical and spiritual formation' (the document's introduction) is

given, inevitably the old division between 'getting communion' and the mystery of Christ's action is restored. Surely, this is a high price for not thinking clearly about the priesthood?

Pastoral decline

A rule of thumb for detecting bad theology is whether it leads either to the endorsement of suffering or to pastoral decline. Consider this situation. When priests are in short supply, bishops inevitably have to concentrate manpower in central locations. Now consider the small scattered and isolated communities where gathering for the eucharist is the only time the community comes together and celebrates their identity. These communities are those most affected by being deprived of the eucharist. Yet ironically these are where the eucharist is most important to sustain the life of faith. Small or rural communities are used to this treatment from bureaucrats. From the Church they should be able to expect better.

When priests just drop in to supply a service – as inevitably happens – rather than being seen as part of the community (often hard enough today), they come to be seen as outside experts who turn up when they can. When many politicians are now concerned about their image as 'being far from those they represent', it is incongruous that we are planning for a situation where the priest's visit for the eucharist is like the clinic of the expert on circuit. Thus these services, proposed in order to preserve the priesthood in its present form, actually undermine the priesthood.

To conclude

Facing my questions, few bishops would *declare* that the priesthood is more central to the Christian mystery than the eucharist, or that priesthood is a matter of an individual sense of religious calling. However, what we do communicates far more than what we write or preach. So it should be. Christ commanded his disciples to break the bread and so share in him (a doing) rather than to lecture on his mystical presence among them (a saying). Thus we should be proposing experiments in the practical structures of priesthood rather than with the eucharist.

Thomas O'Loughlin is a lecturer in theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter.

NOTES

¹ *Celebrations of the Word & Communion for Sunday & weekday celebrations in the absence of a priest*: 'Approved for interim use from Advent 1996 by the Department for Christian Life and Worship of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales' (p 2). It was published by their Liturgy Office, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PL.

² *The Didache* 9:4 and 10:5.

³ For the history of the eucharist in the early Church I rely on É. Nodet and J. Taylor, *The origins of Christianity: an introduction* (Collegeville, 1998).

⁴ Looking between the lines in visitation registers, one finds bishops who were neither stupid nor willing to write something which would cause them to act in an unproductive way. Bishops without this pastoral judgement tend to be those who are now are noted for their 'zeal', but who left their dioceses in uproar.

⁵ E.g. St Thomas in *Summa theologiae* 3, q. 60 on the character of Order.