

50TH INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS 2012

SELECTION FROM CONCURRENT SESSIONS

The Eucharist: Communion with Christ
and with One Another

Dublin, Ireland. 10th–17th June, 2012

WHEN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY GATHERS ON SUNDAY IN THE ABSENCE OF THE PRESBYTER: WHAT HAPPENS?

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SATURDAY 16TH JUNE 2012

A major challenge that faces the Church worldwide is a severe shortage of ordained priests to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist for local communities of the faithful. This prospect is only gradually beginning to dawn on the Irish ecclesial horizon. Most parishes have seen over the past number of years a gradual reduction in the number of priests serving their pastoral needs. In most rural parishes today, and increasingly in urban situations, there is just one priest available to serve the parish. Occasionally, the local diocesan priest is supported by an active retired or returned missionary priest. This situation can only become more challenging in the foreseeable future as the average age of the clergy continues to increase. Already, in several Irish dioceses about 50 per cent of the priests are more than sixty-five years of age. So, over the next ten years, more rural parishes will be grouped together in an effort to provide a Sunday Eucharist as the number of ordained priests drops sharply. This means that many existing local Christian communities will not have access to a Sunday Eucharistic each week, as they might have a right to expect. The focus of the considerations here will be: what happens when there is no ordained priest there on a Sunday to lead the Eucharist?

In order to respond to this question it is important to begin by looking at some basic liturgical and sacramental principles that will guide possible solutions to the problem. There are various possibilities, but it is important that we have an awareness of some key principles before making a choice from among these. The latter part of the article will outline the various possibilities and offer a brief evaluation of each. It is hoped that these may act as a starting point for reflection on the pastoral responses that will have to be made by dioceses in the coming years.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

The first principle is that all of our liturgical reflection and action is rooted in the Paschal mystery. The mystery here is not a conundrum, but the plan of God that has been revealed to us in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.¹ It is where God's plan has become accessible to human experience and transformed human history. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we know the extent of God's love for us; we know the potential for love that is within each of us and how this can be expressed; we know the cost of that love; we know that God's plan is yet to be fully realised, that the final gathering together of all God's people in a communion of love and fellowship is something to which we look forward in hope. The most concrete expression of the mystery in the life of Jesus occurred at the Last Supper, at the time of the Pasch, hence the Paschal mystery. It is here that he articulated most clearly in word and deed the extent of his love, as he prepared to give himself in loving service to the Father and to those to whom he had been sent.

Each time we engage in acts of self-giving service, in genuine acts of love, we are, through the power of the Spirit, sharing in that Paschal mystery. The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church articulates and deepens this sharing in the Paschal mystery. They enable us to become more conscious of and responsive to that plan of God, of which we are a vital element. God is calling us into communion of life with one another and with God's self. The liturgy and the sacraments deepen that communion and provide the resources we need to realise it in our lives.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUNDAY

A second principle is that Sunday is the most original and important day in the Christian calendar and has been from the very beginning. It is the day of the resurrection and the day of the first appearances of the risen Christ. It is the day marking the start of the New Creation. It is the day on which the Spirit comes upon the gathered disciples and empowers them to cast aside their fears and to go out boldly proclaiming their faith in the risen Christ. It is the day when the community gathers to celebrate the memory of the risen Jesus, when they break bread together and recognise his presence among them. They describe Sunday as 'the eighth day' because it is a day outside time, a day that anticipates the end-time when we are fully reconciled and at home with one another in God's household. You could say, as many liturgists do, that Sunday is a kind of sacrament of the whole Paschal mystery.

One can see that the origins of the Church lie in these events occurring on Sunday. Christ called the community of his disciples together and formed them, not just through his public life and ministry but also in his interactions with them after his resurrection, many of which took place 'on the first day of the week'. This community was enabled to witness to him – to his death and resurrection and to the message he embodied and proclaimed – because he gave them the gift of the Spirit that had empowered him in his public life. This, too, happened on the first day of the week. Therefore, Sunday is a day to commemorate the very foundations of the Church, in its Christological and pneumatological dimensions.

It is worth reflecting further on the reality of the resurrection to appreciate more fully the ecclesial significance of Sunday. Many features of the resurrection appearances enable us to see facets of the Church in its full splendour. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples in the context of community or with a view to the community being affirmed (Mk 16:14). So, the appearances themselves are not private affairs. Even when Jesus appears to Mary, it is with a view to her sharing the good news with the rest of the disciples (Jn 20:17-18). He extends peace, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation to those who are gathered (Lk 24:36). His presence to them is itself an act of reconciliation and, in John's Gospel, it is during his appearance to the disciples that he commissions them to be ministers of forgiveness

(Jn 20:21-23). The risen Jesus enables his disciples to understand his true identity and significance by reflecting on their scriptures with them, as he did on the road to Emmaus. Their hearts burned within them as he explained the scriptures to them. They were now able to see that he was indeed the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel (Lk 24:25-32, 45; Acts 2:36). He engages with them in table-fellowship, sharing a meal with them, allowing them to recognise him even as he vanishes from physical sight (Mk 16:14; Lk 24:28-32; Jn 21:9-13). Ultimately, his most intimate presence is not dependent on ocular vision. Finally, he sends his disciples out on mission, to share the good news with all creation (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47-49).

These features of the resurrection appearances are also tasks of the Church – to assemble the people of God in community and fellowship, to extend forgiveness and healing, to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour, to assemble around the table of the Eucharist and to be a missionary community. This is what Jesus did in his own public ministry and this is what the Church can now do because it is gifted with the same Spirit who animated Jesus in his carrying out his mission. This is a Spirit-filled community embodying the presence of Christ in the world. It is a sacramental community.

These tasks also reflect the very structure of the eucharistic liturgy. This reminds us of the statement of Henri de Lubac that the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church. Therefore, it is entirely fitting that when the Church gathers, especially on Sunday, that it give as full an expression as possible to its full sacramental nature.

The history of the Church also bears witness to the centrality of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. It was the first holy day of all, and was in place well before the annual celebration of Easter became established. Ample evidence can be found in the early Christian writers to show that Sunday was *the* day for the community to gather in prayer and to celebrate the Eucharist.

At the close of the Eucharistic Congress in Bari, in 2005 – which had as its theme 'Without Sunday we cannot live' – Pope Benedict XVI gave a very graphic illustration of how seriously the early Christians took their Sunday assembly for the Eucharist.² He recalled an event in Abitene (303), in modern Tunisia, when forty-nine Christians were

taken by surprise as they had gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, despite a very severe prohibition by the Emperor Diocletian. When they were arrested and interrogated, they were asked how they could have been so foolish to disobey the Emperor's orders, knowing the fatal consequences of their disobedience. They replied: *sine dominico non possumus*, we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. They were tortured and executed for their faith and their commitment to their Sunday gathering for the Eucharist. They, like many more of them then and since, witness to the importance of gathering on Sunday to remember who they are and to be nourished for mission.

In this context it can be noted that weekday celebrations of the Eucharist were a later development in the Church. It would seem that at first this was a practice originating in Northern Italy and North Africa, but which began to spread from about the fifth century onwards to other parts of the Church.³ However, as James Dallen notes, '[I]n the course of the centuries, while weekday Eucharist became customary, it was never on a par with Sunday Eucharist. Weekday Eucharist nourishes personal devotion, but the Sunday Eucharist is vital to the community's life and well-being. As Vatican II repeats, Sunday is the celebration of the Easter mystery, the fundamental feast day, the basis and centre of the whole liturgical year and the day for sharing the Eucharist'.⁴ It is true to say that the Christians of the East have a much better appreciation of the primacy of the Sunday than do those in the West.⁵ A better appreciation of the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist is, then, not without ecumenical significance.

So, as a Christian community the Sunday gathering is and always has been a central and vital action. The gathering is naturally focused on the celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore, if the Eucharist cannot be celebrated there is some deficiency in the gathering. What to do in those circumstances is something to which we have to return later. For the moment, however, it is important, that the centrality of the Sunday gathering is established and understood.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY

A third principle is that the Christian assembly is a basic expression of the Church's identity and nature. The importance of the Christian

assembly has been highlighted by French liturgical scholars⁶ for many decades and their efforts have been bearing fruit especially since the Second Vatican Council. This is particularly evident in the *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* (2002) (hereafter GIRM), which now mentions the first presence of Christ as being in the assembly: 'Christ is really present in the very liturgical assembly gathered in his name' (no. 27). This is in contrast to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (no. 7), which says: 'Lastly he is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20)'.⁷ So, the gathering itself is the gathering of a holy people, giving expression to the holiness of the Church. The local assembly is now the Church gathered in this place, at this time. The assembly is a sacramental reality. Here Christ is present; here the Spirit is at work; here the plan of God is being realised.

The local assembly is the subject of the liturgical action, not just the presiding priest. It is this understanding of the importance of the assembly that leads to the proper role of each member being articulated. There is a variety of ministries in the assembled community and each should find expression in the liturgical action. The priest has a role, but so have others, such as deacons, readers, acolytes, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, the choir, ushers, collectors and so on. All are called to a full conscious and active participation in the liturgical action of the assembly.

In the ancient tradition of the Church, the person who presided over the assembly when it gathered for the liturgy, especially for the Eucharist, was the person who presided over the everyday life of the community.⁸ In the second millennium this was reversed and the one who presides at the Eucharist can preside over the life of the community. This person was originally called the presbyter, a term that is used interchangeably with the term priest in the documents of the Council. This use of language is indicative of a changing perspective. Originally, the emphasis was on the community, a holy people, led by its presbyter. Something of this is being recaptured by the use of this term 'presbyter' in contemporary documents. The leadership of the community is again being accentuated. The presbyter is the one who reminds the community of its call to share in the realisation of the plan of God and calls it to celebrate its presence in the Eucharist. The

presbyter is the one who enables the members of the priestly people of God to realise the full expression of their calling – to witness to the plan of God and to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God for what they have received in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The presbyter's role is vital to that of the Christian community and without his presence there is a serious deficiency. His absence on a Sunday, then, is an impoverishment of the assembly. Without him present, the assembly cannot celebrate the Eucharist.

THE EUCHARIST AS AN ACTION

A fourth principle is that the Eucharist is primarily an activity of the Church, not just something that we passively receive. At a popular level, when we mention the word Eucharist we think of the elements, the bread and wine that we receive at Mass. However, in its most fundamental aspect the Eucharist is an action, more verb than noun. The Eucharist is a liturgical and sacramental action. We gather as a Church; we extend reconciliation to one another and receive God's reconciling love into our hearts; we proclaim the Word of God and reflect upon it; we offer our gifts of bread and wine, symbols of our life's work and generosity; through the prayer spoken over these gifts and the action of God's Spirit, these are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ which are then offered back to us for our nourishment; finally, we are sent out on mission to live the mystery that we have celebrated. At each stage we are being engaged by the risen Christ with a deepening intensity and in turn our own relationship with him is also being strengthened.

We sometimes miss the dynamic of the action because our liturgies can be so poorly celebrated, lacking the full richness of the liturgical actions that remind the assembly of who they are and of what they are doing. The gathering song at the beginning, as well as a ministry of hospitality, can help people to have a sense of assembly as they begin the eucharistic celebration. The use of the presidential chair is a symbolic reminder of the fact that the presider is the one who presides over and leads the community, not in an autocratic fashion, but as a genuine servant of the assembly. The penitential rite, too, is an occasion for those gathered to realise their need to be in good relationship with one another, if they are to be in good relationship

with God. The Liturgy of the Word is proclaimed by the lectors as well as by the ordained ministers. This is a reminder that all the baptised are called to proclaim and witness to God's Word, not just those in orders. Christ is present in the word and its proclamation. Therefore, the gospel procession, the reverencing of the book, and the style of proclamation can all draw attention to this faith reality. The offertory procession is an integral part of the eucharistic action, reminding us that we present our offerings to God, with those of Christ, so that they can be transformed and returned to us with a totally new purpose: so that we can consume the Body and Blood of Christ for our renewal and nourishment. Thus the elements that we receive back are the ones which we offered but now utterly transformed. There is a very real giving and receiving at work in the Eucharist. Therefore, distributing previously consecrated hosts is to diminish the symbolism of what is happening. For centuries now, popes have been issuing reminders only to distribute for consumption at each celebration of the Eucharist those elements that have been consecrated at that Mass. This is reiterated again in the GIRM 85. It is also recommended that Communion be offered under both species. The joint pastoral letter, *One Bread One Body*, published by the Irish Episcopal Conference and the Episcopal Conferences of England & Wales and Scotland, strongly recommended this.⁹ It is also important to note that the prayers after Communion, in the Missal, are outward focused. They are reminding us that our celebration of the Eucharist and our consumption of the Body and Blood of Christ is with a view to mission. Thus, it is not an appropriate time for the public recitation of private devotional prayers. Introducing them here only serves to reinforce the misconception that the Eucharist is a private affair. The eucharistic action is much richer than this. It is an action of the entire assembly, giving expression to its nature and mission, being renewed and energised by the multifaceted presence of the risen Christ, so that it can advance the renewal of the entire creation in harmony with the plan of God.

The richness of the liturgical and sacramental symbolism is lost when we take a minimalist approach to celebrating the Eucharist. The less dynamic our celebration of the Eucharist is, the less we avail of the rich variety of gestures and symbols prescribed in the Missal itself, the more likely it is to be confused with alternative liturgies, which may have to be celebrated when no presbyter is present. In fact, alternative

liturgies led by other ministers and which use a range of gestures and symbols may well serve to overshadow the celebration of the Eucharist itself, especially if this is done in a minimalist fashion.

Unless there is a proper grasp of the richness of the liturgical principles and actions that accompany the celebration of the Eucharist and unless these find proper expression in the actual celebrations of the Eucharist, then there will be confusion when alternative liturgies are celebrated, especially if these involve the distribution of the Holy Communion. Attention to these issues is a first step in preparing properly for the occasions when no presbyter is present on a Sunday.

WHAT HAPPENS THEN WHEN NO PRESBYTER IS PRESENT ON SUNDAY?

A number of things remain constant for the Sunday, irrespective of the presence or absence of the presbyter. The Paschal mystery remains central to the life of the Christian community. Sunday retains its sacramental significance. It is still important that the community assembles for worship, for some form of liturgical action that allows it to give expression to its identity and mission.

The issue of a Sunday liturgy in the absence of a presbyter has been addressed in a number of official documents since the Council.¹⁰ The first of these, *Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (26th September 1964), was issued following the publication of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. It recommended bible services, led by a deacon or layperson appointed by the bishop. Essentially, the liturgy was to follow the structure of the Liturgy of the Word, as it is in the Mass. It was to terminate with the prayer of the faithful and the Lord's Prayer.

In 1967 the Sacred Congregation for Rites issued an *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, which dealt with the question ministers other than the presbyter or deacon distributing Communion (no. 33). Then in 1973 the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an instruction, an *Instruction on Facilitating Sacramental Eucharistic Communion in Particular Circumstances*, which greatly extended the circumstances in which Holy Communion might be made available to those who requested it and the kinds of people who may distribute it. The provisions were very generous and applied

also to Sundays when an ordained priest was not available to celebrate the Eucharist. So, in the space of six years, there was a very significant development in thinking and practice around this issue.

In 1988 the Congregation for Divine Worship issued more specific guidelines in its *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Presbyter*, acknowledging the fact that there is a genuine shortage of ordained priests to provide presidency of the Eucharist in large sections of the Church today. It was not setting out to encourage the development of these alternative Sunday liturgies; rather it was simply attempting to guide and to prescribe what should be done when real circumstances require the decision to have Sunday celebrations in the absence of a presbyter.

It is important that the Christian community is encouraged to gather on the Sunday to meet and to pray. There can be a great sense of loneliness and isolation if people cannot meet as Christians and experience the support of a real community of like-minded people. Without such human support they can easily become prey to sects, only too willing to address that need. The *Directory* makes an important point when it states that: '... pastoral effort should concentrate on measures which have as their purpose' that the Lord's day becomes in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work. 'In this way Sunday will stand out in today's culture as a sign of freedom and consequently as a day established for the well-being of the human person, which clearly is a higher value than commerce or industrial production' (no. 16). This highlights a value that needs to be retrieved in many countries today and one that is not dependent on the presence of the presbyter. To take time out from business in order to pray as a community is in itself a very significant statement by Christians about their identity, their vision of life and their values.¹¹ It is a sacramental action in itself.

In the first instance, if a presbyter is not available in the local community to lead the Eucharist then a presbyter who is not attached to a parish, for example someone from a religious community or involved in some other pastoral activity, might be invited to lead the community in the celebration of the liturgy. This is a provisional solution. It creates a separation between pastoral leadership and liturgical leadership. In many instances, where a community is led by a pastoral worker during the week, serious tensions arise when a presbyter is brought

in from outside, generally having no pastoral relationship with this community. While it may be a solution, it is not a really satisfactory one, either from a pastoral or a theological perspective.

A second solution may be to encourage those who can to attend the Eucharist with another community that is convenient to them. This will be an obvious solution to propose in the Irish context, since in many instances the existing communities are already quite small and they can be easily accommodated in neighbouring parish churches. This is already happening to some extent with the clustering of parishes or the formation of new pastoral areas. Although this is a physical possibility, it is not an ideal pastoral solution, because it breaks up the existing community. There is something slightly artificial about communities that have some natural rhythm the rest of the week having to dis-member on a Sunday and reassemble elsewhere in order to celebrate the Eucharist, which is meant to be a high point of their being a community in the first instance. In a sense, it is again decoupling the Eucharist and the day to day life of the community. This was a separation about which *Sacrosanctum Concilium* warned: there was to be no divorce between life and liturgy.

A third solution, not listed in the *Directory*, is to have Eucharist for the community on some other day of the week. While this might appear attractive, it fosters a rupture between Sunday and the Eucharist. Eventually, it would lessen the significance of Sunday as the Lord's day. As was mentioned above, weekday celebrations of the Eucharist are a later development of the tradition and could be seen more as an issue of personal devotion than being central to the life of the Church. Certainly, the priority of Sunday cannot be usurped even by weekday celebrations of the Eucharist.

If we leave the presbyter out of the situation entirely, then there are a number of other possibilities suggested by the *Directory*.

A LITURGY OF THE WORD

In this case, people could gather at their usual place of assembly, normally the parish church. Here they may have a gathering song, an introductory rite and a penitential rite. Then they use the normal Liturgy of the Word for that Sunday. This may be followed by a homily

provided by a deacon or a homily prepared by the pastor or bishop. This may be followed by time for reflection, the prayer of the faithful and the Lord's Prayer, with a dismissal.¹² This celebration could be led by any member of the community appointed by the pastor or the bishop.

This arrangement has obvious advantages in that there is no danger of those attending confusing this liturgy with a celebration of the Eucharist. It ensures that the people of the parish assemble together to give expression to their identity as the community of the disciples of Jesus, to offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God. They are nourished by the Word of God and by the support that they offer one another. It overcomes the sense of isolation or loneliness that Christians may experience in absence of the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist.

A LITURGY OF THE WORD WITH THE DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNION

This can follow the same basic structure as the previous option, but with the very significant difference that now there is the opportunity to receive Holy Communion. The *Directory* gives clear guidelines for this celebration. After the general intercessions, there is to be a prayer of thanksgiving, for which several psalm options are mentioned (for example, Psalms 100, 113, 118, 136, 147, 150). But this thanksgiving prayer is not meant to resemble the Eucharistic Prayer in any way. Before the Lord's Prayer, the minister places the ciborium on the altar, and again there is to be a prayer of thanksgiving before the distribution of Communion.

It is recommended that the Communion distributed at this celebration would be that consecrated earlier that day in some other parish or community, or at least consecrated at the last Mass celebrated in that place. It is also recommended that at some point during the assembly, preferably at the start, the assembly be reminded to unite themselves spiritually with their pastor and the community with which he is celebrating the Eucharist on that Sunday. In this way, at least there is some sense of connection with the eucharistic gathering.

While this has the advantage of allowing people to be nourished by the Body of Christ, it still runs the risk of confusing this liturgy with that of the eucharistic action. Given that often our experience of

the eucharistic liturgy is so impoverished, a well celebrated liturgy of this kind may prove even more attractive than a minimalist style of celebration by the local presbyter. Furthermore, it helps to reinforce the idea that Mass is really and only about being able to receive Communion. So, the question arises in the minds of many: what is the difference between this liturgy and the Eucharist celebrated by the presbyter? The single biggest issue is that generally people do not fully understand the significance of the liturgical action that is the Eucharist. As alluded to earlier, they see it more as a noun than as a verb.

It is for these reasons that many bishops are now becoming much more reserved in granting permission for this kind of celebration.¹³ And in the context of weekday assemblies of the faithful, the need is even less pressing and less convincing.

Although, this seems to be the position that has most support today, both from theologians and the magisterium, history does show that during the Middle Ages, it was indeed quite common for monks and nuns to celebrate liturgies where the Eucharist was distributed. Interestingly, these placed a heavy emphasis on the penitential dimension of the Christian life. They had extensive penitential prayers and saw the Eucharist as eradicating the effects of sin that remained even after the sin had been sacramentally forgiven. Interestingly, these liturgies did not contain a formal Liturgy of the Word, although they did use psalms, nor did they use any prayers from the text of the Mass that might lead to confusing the liturgy with a proper celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁴

Here, too, it is worth recalling that there is a line of tradition in the early Church of people, monks, nuns and laity, reserving the eucharistic species in their cells or homes for consumption according to their desire. Others took it with them when embarking on a journey, carefully secured or wrapped in a cloth, so that they could receive Communion when absent from their local community.¹⁵

While there is historical precedent for liturgies, other than the Eucharist, where Communion is distributed, nevertheless when one attends to the whole tradition of the Church and to the rich theology of the Eucharist that has developed since the beginning of the last century, it does seem more prudent to follow its natural development. In other words, the reception of Holy Communion should not be

separated from the celebration of the Eucharist, except in very rare circumstances. The rationale for doing so has been outlined in the principles stated at the outset of this presentation.

THE FAMILY OR GROUP OF FAMILIES GATHER ON SUNDAY FOR PRAYER

A third possibility offered by the *Directory* is that: 'When on a Sunday a celebration of the Word of God along with the giving of Holy Communion is not possible, the faithful are strongly urged to devote themselves to prayer "for a suitable time either individually or with the family or, if possible, with a group of families."' In these circumstances the telecast of liturgical services can provide useful assistance' (no. 32). This may be a very practical solution in situations where Catholics are a real minority or geographically very isolated.

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS WITH OR WITHOUT HOLY COMMUNION

A fourth option is to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours, with the inclusion of the readings for that Sunday, with or without the distribution of Holy Communion. This option comes close to one which was not uncommon in medieval religious communities of men and women. The Liturgy of the Hours is the Prayer of the Church. This is in fact the daily public prayer of the Church and has an even longer lineage than daily Eucharist. It provides a structure that enables the gathered community to keep a liturgical unity with the universal Church, past and present. However, the same comments can be applied to it as have already been made concerning the Liturgies of the Word, with or without the distribution of Communion.

WHO PRESIDES?

The *Directory* offers guidance as to who should preside at these liturgies in the absence of the presbyter. In order of priority: a deacon; an instituted acolyte or lector; other lay women or men. There is guidance, too, about the vesture of those presiding. The deacon may wear his stole or dalmatic and use the presidential chair.

When laypersons preside they are not to use words that are proper to a priest or deacon and are to omit rites that are too readily associated

with the Mass; for example, greetings – especially ‘The Lord be with you’ – and dismissals, since these might give the impression that the layperson is a sacred minister. They are not to use vesture that may be confused with that of an ordained minister and they are not to use the presidential chair.

It is not necessary here to explore the question of lay presidency of the Eucharist nor is it an option in the current circumstances. However, it is a question that has received attention from both historians and theologians. Reference has already been made earlier to a seminal article by Hervé-Marie Legrand, which still remains a point of reference for discussion of the issue.¹⁶

BETTER DISTRIBUTION OF ORDAINED PRIESTS WORLDWIDE

Some will point to a better distribution of priests, both in a diocese and worldwide. This might solve some problems, but relatively speaking the southern hemisphere would still experience a far greater shortage than Europe and North America. In fact, we would end up robbing younger churches of their priests in an attempt to restore an older and more familiar pattern in Europe. Indeed, in this context, the agenda of the new evangelisation is meant to address the revitalisation of the Church in Europe, which will inevitably involve a revitalisation of the ordained ministry. Obviously, prayer for an increase in the number of those responding to the call to ordained priestly ministry has also to be included in one’s solutions.

THE NEED FOR EDUCATION AND PREPARATION OF THE FAITHFUL

It may be some years yet before these alternative celebrations become a reality for many parish communities in Ireland. However, this is not a reason for complacency because within ten years it is a situation that any parish may have to face on a Sunday if a priest appointed to lead the community simply cannot be there. In the meantime we need to begin the preparation for these eventualities. There is a major educative task to be undertaken. People need to be educated about the real meaning of the Sunday celebration. This is a catechetical task and can probably be done most effectively by genuinely worthy celebrations of the Sunday Eucharist, paying due attention to the rich symbolism that amplifies the meaning of what is being celebrated in

the Eucharist. It is a task which might first begin with the ordained ministers themselves.

Preparation for this can also begin within the weekday assemblies in parishes. Already this is beginning to happen where a member of the community leads a liturgy if the local priest cannot celebrate the Mass with the assembly. As people become accustomed to this kind of celebration, they will be more easily able to value and enter into other kinds of liturgy on a Sunday if the presbyter cannot lead them.

No matter what happens, the Sunday gathering for the Eucharist remains normative. Any other liturgy, no matter how well celebrated, remains provisional or substitutional. This is why in some instances these liturgies are described as celebrated ‘in anticipation of a presbyter’. Meanwhile, we pray that the Church will be provided with the full complement of ministries so that the Eucharist can be celebrated by every Christian community that gathers for its Sunday assembly.

NOTES

- 1 For a fine exploration of how the Paschal mystery and the liturgical life of the Church are related, see Gregory Collins OSB, *Meeting Christ in His Mysteries: A Benedictine Vision of the Spiritual Life*, Dublin: Columba, 2010.
- 2 Benedict XVI, *Heart of the Christian Life: Thoughts on Holy Mass*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, p. 12.
- 3 Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009, pp. 27–8.
- 4 *The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays*, Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1994, p. 46.
- 5 See Robert Taft, *Beyond East & West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1984.
- 6 See for example: Aimé-George Martimort, *The Church at Prayer*, Vol. I, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, revised edition, 1984; idem, 'L'Assemblée liturgique', *La Maison-Dieu* 20 (1949):153–175; Thierry Maertens, *Assembly for Christ: From Biblical Theology to Pastoral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970.
- 7 For further commentary on this, see David N. Power and Catherine Vincie, 'Theological and Pastoral Reflections', *A Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Edward Foley, Nathan D. Mitchell and Joanne Pierce, eds, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007, pp. 51–5.
- 8 Hervé-Marie Legrand, 'The Presidency of the Eucharist According to the Ancient Tradition', *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, R. Kevin Seasoltz, ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982, pp. 196–221.
- 9 Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England & Wales, Ireland and Scotland, *One Bread One Body*, London: CTS; Dublin: Veritas, 1998, no. 25 and 52; see also GIRM no. 85 esp. and 281–7.
- 10 For a discussion of these documents, see Thomas R. Whelan, 'Sunday Liturgies in the Absence of the Eucharist', *Parishes in Transition*, E. Duffy, ed., Dublin: Columba, 2010, pp. 179–207.
- 11 See Benedicta Boland OSB, 'Sunday Rest: A Contemplative Approach to Worship' *Sunday Morning: A Time for Worship*, Mark Searle, ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982, pp. 155–72.
- 12 A good model for this kind of celebration is provided by John McCann in his *Weekday Celebrations for the Christian Community: A Resource for Deacons and Lay Ministers*, Dublin: Veritas, 2000.
- 13 See for example, The Bishops of Kansas, 'Sunday Eucharist – do this in memory of me', *Origins* 25:8, July 13, 1995, 121–24.
- 14 See Jean Leclercq, 'Eucharistic Celebrations without Priests in the Middle Ages', *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, R. Kevin Seasoltz, ed., pp. 222–30.
- 15 Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*, 26.
- 16 See footnote 6 above. Also, a very helpful survey is provided by Nicholas H. Taylor's *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach*, London: Mowbray, 2009.