

Without community, there is no Eucharist- Daniel O' Connell

A divided community is an affront to any celebration of the Eucharist, writes Daniel OConnell

Imagine the following scenario: a local parish priest announces at the end of mass that there will be a suspension of the Eucharist in the parish for the next six weeks.

His primary reason is the recent division within the parish community over the provision of a new halting site. He points out that some parishioners support the proposal and others do not – which he quickly adds, is perfectly legitimate.

However, this difference of opinion has harmed relationships within the community. There is less cohesion, less good will and a growing animosity between people.

In some cases there is even outright hostility towards the Traveller community. There are signs of a trenchant resistance to even the possibility of the new site, although many of the Traveller families have lived in the parish for a long time, indeed a lot longer than many of the settled parishioners.

The parish can now be split into three groups – those who oppose the site, those who support it and those who don't want to take sides.

He goes on to say that the issue of the halting site has uncovered some divisions in the community that have been papered over for years.

Under the circumstances, there is little point pretending to be a Eucharist community. He has decided to suspend its celebration and uses the writings of St. Paul as his theological grounding.

Theological

The theological justification for such a dramatic step is found in the letters of St. Paul to the Christians living in Corinth. Paul wrote these letters about 53-54 CE.

This is significant as they were written roughly twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus and about fifteen years before the first gospel. Therefore, these are the first surviving written texts about the Eucharist.

From the start of his letter, Paul is concerned about the quality of faith and relationships among the community in Corinth.

Rival

He describes the rival groups in the early chapters of the letter, saying that they are not Christ centred. He is also concerned about the quality of the celebration of the Eucharist in Corinth.

He says : I hear that there are divisions among you...When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.

For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What!

Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

In those days, the Eucharistic gathering included a meal in someone's house. This often took place in a room which opened out into an atrium or patio area.

In Corinth it appears that a practice had emerged whereby the host and special friends sat around three sides of the table and enjoyed plenty of food and drink.

Those who were not in the inner circle were left outside in the open area, looking in, often without food or drink. This sort of arrangement made no sense to Paul.

There can be no Eucharist where people "show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing".

This was not a Eucharist community – the divisions among the people of Corinth undermined the quality of the Eucharist.

According to Paul, a Christ-centred community is the necessary basis for the celebration of any Eucharist. There can be no Eucharist in a divided community.

A Christian community of faith is the foundation and basis for the celebration of the Eucharist. There was little evidence of love among the community in Corinth and so Paul questioned the quality of the Eucharist.

This is a very communitarian approach to the Eucharist and inverts an understanding and approach that is common today.

Many believe that it is in going to mass and celebrating the Eucharist that they draw closer to God and become better people. One goes to mass to deepen one's relationship with Christ, to listen to His Word and receive His Body. Then, upon leaving mass, one can feel a little more connected to God through Christ. However, this understanding misses Paul's point.

Relationships

The quality of relationships among the community is imperative. Sincere Eucharistic celebration implies the whole community becoming what they receive – the Body of Christ in and to the world.

The Incarnation is both an historical event and a present reality through the Body of Christ present today as the Church, which is itself a sacrament of Christ.

Were he around today, Paul might question if we concentrate too much on the individual relationship with Christ, without due consideration to the presence of Christ in the community.

Paul links community and Eucharist and suggests that a unified community is the necessary basis for a proper celebration of the Eucharist. A divided community is an affront to any celebration of the Eucharist.

Let's return now to our earlier scenario. The actions of the parish priest, disconcerting as they might seem, remind us that when we go to mass we can too easily leave divisions among the Christian community at the Church gate.

At mass we say our prayers, listen to God's Word, feel closer to Jesus, remember the dead, pray for the living, shake hands with our family and friends, and receive Christ in communion.

Upon our exit from mass, we quickly re-inhabit old ways of behaving, in this case, oppositional and reflexive stances regarding the provision of accommodation for Traveller families.

We are not too inclined to recognise ourselves, the Eucharistic community, as the Body of Christ in and to the world, in the ordinary and everyday complexities of our lives.

It is easier to think of the Eucharist as something we get rather than something we become!

Daniel O'Connell is a lecturer in Religious Education, Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick