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Sunday Without a Priest

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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 over the past number of years have seen 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. 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 fifty per cent of the priests are over 65 years of age and the number of seminarians in formation does not offer much prospect of any significant improvement in the demography of the Irish clergy.

The inevitable outcome of all of this is that Sunday Eucharist will not be a reality for many communities that today take it for granted. While simple solutions might be easily proposed, such as having 'a communion service', these can have long-term, serious and unforeseen implications that may well contradict a sound theology of the Eucharist. Therefore, it is important to give thought to some key aspects of the Sunday Eucharistic celebration before rushing into what might appear as simple, pragmatic or pastoral solutions to the problem. In what follows, there is an attempt to outline some key theological and liturgical principles that need to be kept to the fore in planning a response to the Sundays in the absence of a priest. Later, then, some of the practical solutions will be outlined and evaluated in the light of these basic principles. While it is true that pastoral exigencies can shape theology, it is equally true that existing theology must inform the response to these practical realities.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

The first principle is that all of our liturgical action is rooted in the Paschal Mystery. The mystery here is not a conundrum, but the

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plan of God that has been revealed to us in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. 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 and 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 act and word the extent of his love, as he offered himself in loving service to the Father and to those to whom he had been sent.

Each time we engage in acts of selfless 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 articulate and deepen 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, especially the Eucharist, 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 original and most 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 boldly proclaim their faith in the risen Christ. It is the day when the community gathers to break bread together and recognise his presence among them. Sunday is 'the eighth day' because it is outside time, a day that anticipates the end-time when all are fully reconciled and at home with one another in God's household. Sunday is a 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 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, rooted in Christ and the Spirit.

The history of the Church also bears witness to the centrality of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. It was the first holy day, 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.

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.¹ 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'.² It is notable that the Christians of the East have a much better appreciation of the primacy of the Sunday than do those in the West.³

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. This is an idea that has developed considerably since Vatican II. One can see this by contrasting two statements from the *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* (2002) and *Sacrosanctum concilium*. The *General Instruction* mentions the first presence of Christ as being in the assembly: 'Christ is really present in the very liturgical assembly gathered in his name' (#27). This is in contrast to *Sacrosanctum concilium* 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)'.⁴ So there is a growing appreciation that the assembly

1. Paul F Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2009), 27-28.

2. *The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1994), 46.

3. See Robert Taft, *Beyond East & West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1984).

4. For further commentary on this see David N. Power and Catherine Vincie, 'Theological and Pastoral Reflections' in Edward Foley, Nathan D. Mitchell and Joanne Pierce, eds., *A Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 51-55.

bly itself is the gathering of a holy people, giving expression to the holiness of the Church. 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 those present are called to a full, conscious and active participation in the liturgical action of the assembly.

In this context, too, it is important to note the role of the priest. There is a relationship between his role as pastoral leader of the community and his role as leader of the Eucharistic 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.⁵ 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. It points to an effort to integrate again the role of leadership in the community with its liturgical expression in the Eucharist. Earlier theologies of the Eucharist emphasised the importance of the community as a holy people, led by its presbyter, in celebrating the liturgy. Something of this is being recaptured by the use of this term 'presbyter' in contemporary documents. The role of the community under the leadership of its presbyter is again being accentuated. 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. His role is vital to that of the Christian community. His absence on a Sunday, then, is an impoverishment of the assembly and without him it cannot celebrate the Eucharist.

THE EUCHARIST AS AN ACTION

A fourth principle is that the Eucharist is primarily an activity of

5. Hervé-Marie Legrand, 'The Presidency of the Eucharist According to the Ancient Tradition', in R. Kevin Seasoltz, ed., *Living Bread, Saving Cup* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982), 196-221.

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, 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 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, as well as a ministry of hospitality, helps people to have a sense of assembly as they begin the celebration. The use of the presidential chair is a reminder that the presider is the one who leads the community, 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 proclaimed by the lectors, as well as by the ordained ministers, is a reminder that all the baptised are called to proclaim and witness to God's word. The Gospel procession, the reverencing of the book, and the style of proclamation can all draw attention to the presence of Christ in the word. The offertory procession is an integral part of the Eucharistic action, reminding us that we present our offerings to God, with those of Christ, to be transformed and returned to us as the Body and Blood of Christ. Thus the elements that we receive back are the ones which we offered but now 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 issued reminders to distribute for consumption at each celebration of the Eucharist those elements that have been consecrated at that Mass (cf GIRM #85). It is also recommended that communion be offered under both species. It is also important to note that the prayers after communion, in the Missal, remind us that our celebration of the Eucharist is with a view to mission. Thus, it is not an appropriate time for the public recitation of private devo-

tional 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 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.

WHAT HAPPENS THEN WHEN NO PRIEST IS PRESENT?

The issue of a Sunday liturgy in the absence of a priest has been addressed in a number of official documents since the Council.⁶ The first of these, *Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (September 26, 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 (#37).

In 1967 the Sacred Congregation for Rites issued an *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, which dealt with the question of ministers other than the priest or deacon distributing communion (#33). Then in 1973 the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an *Instruction on Facilitating Sacramental Eucharistic Communion in Particular Circumstances*, greatly extending the situations 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.

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 provided direction on what should be done when no priest is available to the Sunday assembly.

The *Directory* encourages the Christian community to gather on the Sunday to meet and pray. This gathering addresses several basic issues for the individual as well as the community. There can be a great sense of loneliness and isolation if people cannot meet as Christians and experience the support of a real

6. For a discussion of these documents see Thomas R. Whelan, 'Sunday Liturgies in the Absence of the Eucharist', in E. Duffy, *Parishes in Transition*, (Dublin: Columba, 2010), 179-207.

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 another 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 (#16).

This highlights a value that needs to be retrieved today. To take time out from business in order to pray as a community is in itself a very significant statement of Christian identity, of a vision of life and values that inform it. So, the Sunday assembly, even without the Eucharist, is vital to the existence and well-being of any Christian community. As was evident in the earlier discussion about the importance of the assembly, the Sunday gathering has a sacramental character in itself.

OPTIONS

However, before exploring the issue of Sunday in the absence of a priest, there are a few interim options to be addressed. First, if a priest is not available in the local community then a priest 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 priest is brought in from outside, often having no pastoral relationship with this community. The tensions here are not simply sociological, they are rooted in deeply theological understandings of Church, Eucharist and ministry. While they are major issues in their own right and merit serious consideration, there is not the space to address them here.

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 communities are already small and they can be easily accommodated in neighbouring parish churches. This is already happening to some extent with the clustering of parishes. 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 dismember on a Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist, which is meant to be a high point of their being a community. In a sense, it is again decoupling the Eucharist and the day to day life of the community.

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. In fact, 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.⁷ Such a 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 that Christians may otherwise experience.

— *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 there is the oppor-

7. For a good model for this kind of celebration see John McCann, *Weekday Celebrations for the Christian Community: A Resource for Deacons and Lay Ministers* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000).

tunity to receive Holy Communion. The *Directory* gives clear guidelines for this celebration. After the general intercessions, there is to be a prayer of thanksgiving, but this 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 another parish or community, or 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 people be reminded to unite themselves spiritually with their pastor and the community with which he is celebrating the Eucharist. In this way, at least there is some sense of connection with a Eucharistic gathering.

While this liturgy has the advantage of allowing people to be nourished by the Body of Christ, it runs the risk of confusing this liturgy with a Mass. Given that so often our experience of the Eucharistic liturgy is poor, a liturgy of this kind well celebrated may prove more attractive than a minimalist celebration by the priest. Furthermore, it may reinforce the idea that Mass is really and only about being able to receive Communion. So, the question can arise: what is the difference between this liturgy and the Eucharist celebrated by the priest? The single biggest issue is that generally people do not fully understand the significance of the liturgical action that is the Eucharist. It is for these reasons that many bishops are now becoming much more reserved in granting permission for this kind of celebration. And in the context of weekday assemblies of the faithful, the need is even less pressing and less convincing.

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 and refrain from the distribution of Communion at liturgies other than the Eucharist. 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 here at the outset.

- *The Family or a Group of Families gather on Sunday for Prayer:* A third possibility offered by the *Directory* is that the

family or a group of families gather for prayer: "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" (#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 priest. In order of priority: a deacon; an instituted acolyte or lector; other lay men or women (sic). There is guidance, too, about the vesture: the deacon may wear his stole or dalmatic and use the presidential chair.

When lay persons 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 an ordained minister. They are not to use vesture that may be confused with that of an ordained minister nor use the presidential chair.

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 experiences 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. In this con-

text, 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 a while yet before these alternative celebrations become a reality for many parishes 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 an ordained priest cannot be there. In the meantime we need to begin to prepare for these eventualities. This is a major educative task. People need to be educated about the real meaning of the Sunday celebration. It is a catechetical task that includes 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 priest cannot lead them.

Whatever solutions are proposed for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest, there is need for serious reflection before agreement is reached. The rich theology of the Eucharist which has developed over the past century needs to inform the choices that are made, otherwise short-sighted pragmatism may seriously undermine a profound regard for and faith in the Eucharist that has been so characteristic of Irish Catholicism for so long.