



LET US PRAY – REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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During this Year of the Eucharist, I offer a series of articles on Eucharistic Spirituality: Source of Life and Mission of our Church. Article #4, *Three Challenges to Eucharistic Spirituality: Privatism, Role of Assembly, Eucharist as Action or Object.*

Today we'll explore challenges to healthy eucharistic spirituality. It's a longer article, born of my experience of sitting in the pew, when, In July, 2001, I achieved 'senior priest' status, having, in my last assignment, served St. Luke's Church, Shoreline as pastor for 19 years. Sitting in the pew, I discovered that it was challenging to find a community whose liturgy nourished my faith - whether because of lack of hospitality, style and choices of music, preaching that had no connection whatever with the scriptures, or the physical arrangement of the church.

Here are three challenges I discovered: privatism, appreciating the role of the assembly in worship, and whether we think of eucharist as an action or as an object.

I'll start with privatism. I suspect there's something deep in our Catholic bones that tells us this: when we get together in church for eucharist, we come as private persons. That is, of course, foreign to what common worship is, and to what our worship tradition actually is. The first meaning of "liturgy", in the original Greek (*leiturgia*), is "work of the people" (not of an individual).

I'm not sure what's behind this phenomenon. Perhaps it's because often enough we come to Sunday Mass rushed. A family may have had a spat in the car or at home. Whatever it is, most Catholics seem to arrive at church as private persons...and often on the run. We can tend to take seating that is private or alone. Somehow we've gotten the idea that, while we come in concert with others, what we're doing is sort of like going to a gas station: filling ourselves up with God's grace. But doing that *privately*.

But eucharistic dining does not, and cannot, happen for lone rangers. Eucharistic dining involves a marvelous gathering of the *clan*, a *fiesta*, a *community* feast...not eating in elegant isolation. Eucharistic dining means rehearsing the surrender of Jesus (his dying and his rising) to the point that we, too, can empty ourselves in service of one another, in service of the poor, in service of the stranger in our midst. We don't do eucharist in isolation

Possibly coupled with that is the exceptional value our society puts on consumption. Here in the land of the free and the home of the brave, you are what you possess. It's extremely difficult to do public worship in a consumer society. The temptation is too strong to "shop for" a nice, quick Mass.

Bringing such a mindset, which is ultimately privatistic and self-absorbed, to worship is fatal. Faith doesn't work that way. Theologian Walter Burghardt has caricatured Sunday eucharist as "a number of individuals (ten or ten thousand), unknown to one another, uncaring for one another, (who) come in out of the cold and, in quavering song and stilted prose, petition

an absent God to become really present, so that they may receive him bodily and return each to his or her isolated home convinced that they have been nourished spiritually" ("A Theologian's Challenge to Liturgy," *Theological Studies*, June, 1974, p. 243)

Our first challenge at Sunday worship, then, is to recognize that we do not come as private persons, when we gather for Sunday Mass.

A second challenge involves taking seriously the role of the assembly, when we do our eucharistic dining. If I were to ask you what you consider to be the most important symbol that liturgy deals with, I suspect you might respond along these lines: bread, wine, the priest, the consecrating words spoken by the priest.

Listen to what our bishops said on this, in the first edition of a great little book on church architecture and worship space. To speak of space and the building, they said, "we need to begin with ourselves – we who are the Church, the baptized, the initiated." (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, No. 27). They noted that it's common to speak of the building where the assembly gathers as "the church", but that what ancient Christians called that was *domus ecclesiae*, the house of the church.

"Among the symbols with which liturgy deals," they wrote, "none is more important than this assembly of believers." (*Ibid.*, p. 28) Then came these astounding words: "The most powerful experience of the sacred is found in the celebration and the persons celebrating, that is, it is found in the action of the assembly: the living words, the living gestures, the living sacrifice." (*Ibid.*, No. 28)

YOU are the most important symbol that liturgy deals with. We forgot this historically (think Middle Ages) and thought what was most important was the priest and the sacraments he dispensed to people who were spectators instead of participants.

Vatican II invited a radically different perspective, with its understanding of church as God's People of God, embracing, in the unity of baptismal hope, *all* of God's children (lay people as well as clergy, women as well as men, young as well as old, sick as well as healthy, black as well as white, wealthy as well as poor).

The Council invited this people to full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy, as its baptismal right. That, incidentally, is why a BIG baptismal font (large enough for adult immersions) is so important in our worship spaces. We need to trip over our fonts when we enter our churches. That's where it all starts. And because we are washed as God's holy

People, we have this baptismal birthright to full, active, and conscious participation at Sunday worship.

A major challenge for us is to reclaim that right and our role as assembly. It is *we* who celebrate the eucharist. It is *we* who do the action of the Mass. *We* who are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ so that we can be Jesus for one another and for our aching and hungry world.

Years ago, I was at dinner with three couples. We were preparing a Marriage Renewal Weekend, together with seven other couples, and, to get to know one another better, one couple had asked the three lead couples and myself to join them at a restaurant. Well into the meal – and after

I was taken aback. This was an alert, sharp, committed Roman Catholic young woman. I responded: “Oh, Brenda, we *all* do eucharist together; It’s an act of the whole community. In fact, it’s God’s spirit we ask to come on the table sharing.” (I had in mind those words of the eucharistic prayer: “Gracious God, you are holy indeed.... Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy....”

Well, that escaped Brenda altogether, because she retorted, with finality: “No, no! *You* have the power.” I was saddened, in that seemed to me that this good lady had a strong case of ‘private person syndrome’, which gave way to zero appreciation for the role of the assembly. She seemed unable to appreciate the insight of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* when, in response to the question. who celebrates the Paschal Mystery, makes these observations: “Liturgy is the action of the *whole Christ*. It is the whole *community*, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates. Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church, ...namely the holy people united and organized under the authority of the bishops.”

Paul VI and St. John Paul II affirmed this boldly, as has Francis. Various factors can contribute to its non-affirmation: sometimes the seating arrangement in a church can frustrate it, clearly, before our Cathedral was renovated, people in the pews were spectators, passive observers at eucharist, the layout of pews (literally a block long), the arrangement of altar and sanctuary, the reredos, the lighting, music that’s more performance than prayer, even the presider’s style - all can say what is of primary importance is not the work of the whole assembly, but only sanctuary and altar and those who minister there.

But, most of all, our mindsets have to change, if we will embrace a spirituality that says no symbol at liturgy is more important than the assembly of believers.

The third challenge involves appreciating sacraments (and therefore the eucharist) as actions, rather than as objects. Over the centuries, we began to think of the eucharist as an object (to be dispensed, or adored, or “given us”), rather than as the action of the assembly of believers.

Some ask: Is eucharist a noun or a verb? In fact, it is both, but it is first of all a verb. It is the gathering. It is the hearing of God’s word. It is the singing of praise. It is the eating. The drinking. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus in the broken bread. They recognized him in *the breaking of the bread*, in the action of Christ with them, in them, for them. We are to do what he has done.

Even the reserved eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle (the noun) is held so that it can be *taken* (verb) to the sick and imprisoned, so that they can *eat* (verb) and have hope. What we reserve (primarily for the sick, and secondarily for private prayer and adoration) is the result of – and intended to help us remember – the action of the assembly that celebrates Jesus’ dying and rising.

From the medieval period on, we had come to see bishops and priests as primary (it’s still in our bones), and indeed as dispensers to the assembly, not as the assembly’s agents and

servants. And in that perspective, we chose to see sacraments as objects, things, rather than as the prayerful actions of the community blessing and eating and drinking the bread and wine. We opted to value frequency and service station efficiency more than getting the sisters and brothers together. (“Gimme that good old 20 minute Mass.”)

Viewing eucharist or the sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders) as objects has a certain limiting, even unhappy, pastoral consequence. I always chuckle when, after Mass as people are exiting, someone says to me at the door: “Father, *your* Mass today was just beautiful.” I tell them: “That’s because you were there.” But, you see, it’s not *my* Mass. It’s *our* Mass. The comment discloses a mindset of sacraments as objects, dispensed by a priest, and of worshippers as spectators, not participants.

Approaching eucharist as object can lead to celebrating it functionally. And because we worship each week (sometimes within the week), it’s easy to go into automatic pilot. That’s not how sacraments work. They are not magic.

We might well ask ourselves to what extent ‘the private person syndrome’, or insensitivity to the role of the assembly, or approaching sacraments as objects influences our own eucharistic spirituality. These attitudes and perspectives go deeper than worship, too. They play themselves out in the way we live the eucharist, in our personal prayer, in our relationship with Jesus, in our relationship with one another, with the poor, in our care for the environment.

Let us ask our tender, loving God to grant us an ever deeper conversion especially through our eucharistic dining, which is a window to eternity and gives us a glimpse of what God calls us to be.