

Eucharistic Famine

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work. - Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n 14)

The Second Vatican Council also affirmed the intrinsic connection between the sacrament of Baptism by which “the faithful are destined for (the) worship” and the Eucharist which is described as “the source and summit of the whole Christian life.” (*Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* n.11). This article will address a number of important factors in that relationship during the past fifty years particularly the tensions and stresses involved in the progressive decline in the number of priests in active ministry.

Catholic people, particularly in the western world are becoming increasingly alarmed at the dramatic contraction in the numbers of priests in active ministry and the consequent critical implications for access to the Sacramental life of the Church. What is troubling Catholics greatly is that access to “the source and summit of the whole Christian life” is under serious threat.

Many Catholics would, from their exposure over the years to catechesis at school and Mass, have some understanding that the Gospel stories about Jesus feeding the crowds in the wilderness are essentially metaphors for the Eucharist. The early purpose of these narratives was to confirm the faith of the earliest Christians that in the Eucharist all humanity has been invited to enjoy God’s outrageously abundant and generous hospitality.

Australian Biblical Scholar, Brendan Byrne makes the point: “In short,” the Christian Community acts as intercessor as “it prays that the entire human race may enjoy the hospitality it has itself received from God.” (1) These stories demonstrate that God’s plenty comes out of little and that there is more than enough for everyone.

Twenty five years ago Francis Moloney, an Australian Biblical scholar, wrote about the pressing need for the Church to rediscover its earliest self-understanding in and through the origins and meaning of the Eucharist. Moloney pointed out that in the Gospel narratives Jesus is depicted as one who revels in table fellowship with the rabble, the broken, the outcast and the sinners. Jesus is seen at his best seated at the common table of the lost and the outcasts: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” (*Lk 15: 1-2*) Moloney had invited his fellow Catholics to ponder Jesus’ teaching about the “Bread of life” and the anomaly of Christians being excluded from the banquet which is the most powerful symbol of their inclusion in the first place (2).

It is precisely those who are regarded as lost and unworthy who are called to sit as honored guests at the common table of Eucharistic belonging. The metaphors Augustine used to describe the ambivalent nature of the Christian community should not be forgotten. The former libertine described the Christian community as: *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (the

Church needing on-going reformation) and the ambivalent oxymoronic *ecclesia casta meretrix* (the Church simultaneously chaste and a prostitute). Augustine, in his less moralizing perspective is probably suggesting that the Christian community is in reality the native home of hypocrites, the dwelling place of those who claim the higher moral ground, who never quite reach the goal but are not condemned for falling short of the ideal.

Over the past few years Catholics in many parts of the world have picked up on a theme first articulated thirty years ago:

“Fr Aylward Shorter, who has worked in Africa for many years, has written about the communities in *The Tablet* and elsewhere. On the theme of ministry, the title he gave to an article published in *Afer* (African Ecclesiastical Review) in 1985 — "Eucharistic Famine in Africa" — says it all in one striking phrase. While world attention was focused on the famine in sub Saharan Africa, Fr Shorter drew attention to an equally destructive eucharistic famine in Africa about which little or nothing was being done. The Churches of the West are well fed and eucharistically privileged. In stark contrast, the majority of third world churches are hungry and eucharistically starved.” - Sean McDonagh ssc. (3)

The *Eucharistic famine* is no longer simply an Africa matter. It has begun to impact itself severely on the rest of the Catholic world particularly in vast countries where priests in rural areas are required to travel enormous distances to serve their people. The problem is approaching critical levels for millions of Catholics who are now experiencing everything from bewilderment to angry frustration with Church leadership for the institutional blindness, paralysis and inertia which has led to this disastrous situation. Catholics are curious about what the bishops and diocesan pastoral planners have been doing with all the sound, detailed evidence based research and future projections that has been made available to them for decades.

The situation in many countries is now growing so grave that parishes are being rapidly amalgamated and serviced by fewer and fewer priests. In some countries in both city and rural areas priests are under enormous stress and, most likely, their health at all levels is being compromised. In some ecclesiastical jurisdictions priests are sponsored often from ‘priest rich’ countries in Africa and Asia to compensate for inevitable death and retirement. The importation of priests has temporarily solved the Mass problem but has done nothing much to address the long term issues. The accelerated introduction of foreign born priests to the local cultures has done little to address what is essentially a local church needs.

This is now a failed, unenlightened maintenance strategy which reduces priests to human sacramental dispensaries who often become detached from any genuine pastoral connection with local communities. As similar situation is developing rapidly in Ireland and the US and this situation is compounded by the rapid aging of priests and large numbers retiring in the next few years.

Fr Brendan Hoban, one of the founders of the *Irish Association of Catholic Priests*, has published again on another dire situation facing the Irish Church in the next decade, namely

the rapid decline in the number of priests. He raises a question which is not new but which is being put with even more insistence now than ever before: Is the Eucharist, the right of all the Baptised, being held hostage now to a discipline and not a dogma? Similar ideas are being expressed about an identical situation exists in the USA where the number of full time serving priests will drop by over a half in the next three years.

Some visionary pastoral solutions are being suggested to address the challenges in countries enduring the Eucharistic famine:

Hoban appeals for a profound re-evaluation of the Catholic Church's pastoral/ministerial options including the admission of married *virii probati* (men of good character) to the priesthood. Fr Hoban cites the very encouraging response of Pope Francis to the pleas of a fellow bishop from a remote area in Brazil:

“It started with a meeting between Erwin Krautler, a bishop in the Brazilian rain-forest, and Francis. Krautler explained that with the small and declining number of priests in his diocese, he was unable to ensure that Catholics in his diocese would have Mass regularly. What would he do? Why not bring this to the Brazilian bishops' conference, Francis suggested, come up with a proposal and bring it to him? “(4)

Hoban also draws attention to a reflection in *The Furrow* by Fr Ned Crosby which is strikingly consonant with what Bishop Krautler has suggested to Pope Francis:

“Will we continue to dig for vocations to the priesthood with broken spades? Will we keep praying for vocations when perhaps God has already answered our prayers? Do we continue to refuse what God is offering and what the Spirit is saying to the Churches now? Are we like people weeping at a well running dry when there are rivers and fresh streams running all around us?” (5)

Catholic bishops in Australia need to emerge from the culture of supine compliance and entropy of the JP II – Benedict years and to reclaim their mission with courage and confidence. Their ordination requires them to discern the signs of the times and to take ownership of the spirit of local diocesan autonomy promised and mandated in Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. This requires of them to listen deeply and to engage in an intelligent adult conversation with the laity specifically focused on local needs and aspirations. (6)

Pope Francis is now urgently calling upon local Churches to take responsibility not only for their unique problems but also for arriving at their own solutions. He is not giving directions but rather coaxing and suggesting. For both bishops and laity this may be an enormous challenge along the road to reform.

There are solutions which are possible and rationally achievable according to Canon Law and Church disciplines:

- Phase out dependence on foreign priests who are serving in our dioceses. The continued employment of these priests does not indicate enlightened ecclesial pastoral policy. While bishops, mostly in western countries have imported these men to address a dramatic shortage of priests, the same problem is manifesting itself in their own communities. Another thing for Western Catholics to consider is that many foreign priests come from very traditional communities where there is little or no knowledge of the Second Vatican Council or the enormous changes which it mandated. (7)
- Admit married men to the priesthood and re-admit resigned priests who would be willing to return to ministry in their own local parish areas.
- Disconnect diaconate from clerical status completely. Women and men special ministers of the Eucharist. They need only the authority of the Bishop to be preachers of the Word. It will require a considerable theological shift for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and of Anointing of the Sick to be delegated to special ministers. Perhaps over time, the experience of a new standard of normality will facilitate shifts in non-core doctrine.

And everywhere I heard the answer of the Church and it was No! No! to any possibility of change or growth.

- John F. Deane (Poet)*

Endnotes

- 1) Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God. A Reading of Luke's Gospel*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2000, 104.
- 2) *A Body Broken for Broken People: The Eucharist in the New Testament*, Melbourne: Collins Dove 1990; republished as *A Body Broken for a Broken People. Divorce, Remarriage and the Eucharist*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd 2015 (Some review notes are linked [HERE](#))
- 3) “Starved of the Sacraments,” *The Tablet*, 7th February 1987 (Linked [HERE](#)). McDonagh is an Irish Columban missionary priest who has served in Asia, principally in the Philippines, for forty years. He is one of the four co-founders of the Association of Catholic Priests, Ireland, and was one of the expert writers/contributors to Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*. Brendan Hoban, “Changing times in the Church,” ACP, 20 July 2015. (Linked [HERE](#)) See a similar story and appeal from the USA, “FutureChurch calls on bishops to stem the priest shortage and preserve access to the Eucharist,” *Future Church Blog* 15/07/15 (Linked [HERE](#)). See also the prescient article by American Canon Lawyer Fr James A Coriden on saving local parish communities (Linked [HERE](#)). See also, James A. Coriden *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology and Canon Law*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.

- 4) Brendan Hoban, “On Changing Times in the Church,” *Association of Catholic Priests*, Ireland, July 20, 2015 (Linked [HERE](#)). See also Hoban’s *Who will break bread for us? Disappearing Priests*, Banley House, Mayo, 2013
- 5) Fr Ned Crosby, *The Furrow*, cited in Brendan Hoban, *Who will break bread for us? Disappearing Priests*, Banley House, Mayo, 2013, 79-80.*
- 6) Brendan Hoban writes of the openness of a local Irish bishop who gave a positive reception to a request that the Episcopal Conference consider the matter of married priests: “In a consultation with Catholics in Kilmore diocese (Cavan, and parts of Leitrim and Fermanagh) Bishop Leo O’Reilly promised his people a few months ago that he would bring their suggestion (about ordaining married men) to the Irish bishops. He has discussed it with some of his bishop-colleagues and it now seems that it will find its way on to a future agenda for a bishops’ meeting in Maynooth.” Cited from “On Changing Times in the Catholic Church.”

See also: Jeanne M. Follman, “Arguing like Catholics,” *Global Pulse*, July 22, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#). NB: *Global Pulse* is under a paywall with an annual subscription of \$22.)

- 7) Eric Hodgens, retired Melbourne priest, offers similar observations and suggestions in “The Catholic Church is really two churches,” *Pearls and Irritations*, 07/08/15 (Linked [HERE](#))

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