

What Part Does the Eucharist Play in the Spiritual Life of a Diocesan Priest?

What I share is simply my own attitude. When I think of the 60+ priests of our diocese, I cannot think of one who is typical of the majority. I am not typical. We are each unique.

When I talk of my own experience, I am not sure how accurately I read it.

I want to distinguish two things:

- eucharistic spirituality in itself
- actual celebrations of Eucharist.

I believe that Eucharistic spirituality touches the essence of being Christian, but I see it more as an engagement with life shaped by my understanding of Eucharist than as a product of my actual celebrations of Eucharist.

1. Eucharistic Spirituality Understood as Engagement with Life

I believe the Eucharist to be the sacramental re-enactment of Jesus' last meal with his disciples.

That meal in its turn summed up the purpose of Jesus' life and ritually anticipated his imminent death (the consequence of his stance for love and justice) and resurrection.

A spirituality based on Eucharist requires of me, therefore, that, *reproducing the pattern of Jesus' death,*

1. I seek to relate to people with integrity:
 - with profound respect,
 - in justice and compassion
 - open to love, indeed with a preferential option for my enemies,
 - forgiving, when needed,taking initiatives where appropriate, irrespective of the cost.
2. I entrust myself to God, whatever is happening, hoping that *God will make all things work together for good.*

Through the sign of a shared covenantal meal of mutually reconciled and loving disciples, the Eucharist graphically expresses the definitive reversal of sin - of self-centredness, injustice, envy and violence.

We momentarily grasp the Kingdom where

- humanity and God are in total harmony
- and human persons connect with each other in mutual respect, profound love and commitment to justice.

A eucharistic spirituality, therefore, involves a commitment to unity, reconciliation and connectedness, while recognising and being thankful for God's enabling grace.

2. My Experience of Actual Celebrations of the Eucharist

(a) *Ambivalent Outcomes*

Celebrations of Eucharist can have startlingly different effects.

1. On the one hand, the Church believes that the source and summit of the true Christian spirit is active participation in liturgy – “*actuosa participatio*” (alert, aware and responsive) i.e. informed and conscious conformity to the mind and heart of Jesus, and union with each other in deep respect - sometimes expressed in dialogue, song and the exercise of ministries).

2. On the other hand (*1 Cor. 11.17-34*), Paul writes of Eucharist celebrated as a lie. Because of the selfish attitudes and behaviours of the participants, they experienced the ritual as counter-productive and destructive.

(Paul thought in dualistic terms. Most times we are not “either/or” but rather shades of grey - persons still in process.)

Celebrations, then, of Eucharist can be either destructive or confirming of genuine eucharistic spirituality.

(b) *Distinguishing Mystery and Atmosphere?*

I believe that sacraments, and therefore Eucharist, belong to the realm of mystery, rather than of “religious” atmosphere.

Mystery is the faith recognition through everyday signs of a deeper and greater reality. It may not be “felt” strongly, if at all.

I am not necessarily fazed whether people “enjoy” Eucharist or not. It is not entertainment. On the other hand, it needs to be celebrated with the dignity appropriate to the greater reality and in a style suitable to the congregation

I am also wary of talk of “a sense of mystery” and believe that it may have no necessary connection to genuine mystery. It can be more a psychologically produced effect of

- esoteric language
- arcane ritual,
- sacred objects
- defined roles
- the power of music, etc.

A deliberately contrived “sense of mystery”

can nourish unhealthy relationships of power and of dependence and co-dependence, just as genuinely getting in touch with the mystery can be helped by appropriate celebration.

(c) Faith or Experience?

In practice my faith orientation is based largely on two factors:

- meditation
- and Eucharist.

For me at this stage of my life both prayer and Eucharist are faith exercises rather than personal “experiences”.

Yet I notice real effects of both in my life (more, however, in the me/God [vertical] dimension than in the us/God [horizontal] dimension).

As far as I can determine, my prayer life seems to give meaning to the celebration of the Eucharist rather than the celebration of Eucharist experientially nourishing my prayer. I think I could survive better as a disciple without actual celebrations of Eucharist than I could without prayer.

(d) Practical Experience

I sometimes wonder where I would place on the spectrum between constructiveness and destructiveness

- conscripted school Masses,
- those Sunday community Masses
 where some participants can still be caught up in feuds,
 where even family members may not speak to each other,
 etc.
- some of the weekday Eucharists of devotion,
- those Masses when my own heart is harbouring unprocessed judgments and hostility
- Masses at weddings or funerals where faith levels may be at a minimum.

I am puzzled (and hurt) by what I guess to be the indifference of Mass-going Catholics to some current issues such as, for example,

- asylum-seekers,
- participation in war,
- nuclear proliferation,
- and also environmental matters.

(I would like to know if they are statistically different from any other broad swathe of secular society. What has been the effect of regular participation in Eucharist?)

I am not sure that regular celebration
has noticeably lead me to open more in love
either to God
or to the other people present.

I suspect that the shortfall between the ideal and the actual
is a source of profound
yet largely unrecognised (and so undealt with) sadness.

(e) Eucharist and Priesthood.

I see my role as priest orientating me
to the ministry of the Word,
to being shepherd and sacramental sign of the community's being, unity and vitality,
and to leading the community in its common worship.

I do not believe, therefore,
that the presidential celebration of Eucharist defines priesthood.
I believe that, as presbyter, I enable the mystery to "happen",
but I personally share in the mystery by virtue of my being baptised:
no more and no less than do the other baptised.

Nor do I believe that priesthood defines me.
My personal sense of worth and identity
Comes rather from the fact that I am disciple/friend of Jesus.

I see my baptism as more important than my ordination.
While being grateful for my call to ministerial priesthood,
I appreciate discipleship more.

Indeed, I like presiding at Eucharist
and trying to celebrate well –
articulating the prayers carefully and doing the actions well -
but I am often distracted and performance-focussed
rather than either God-focussed or people-focussed,
no matter how much I try to be different.

I look forward to giving homilies, particularly at weekends,
even though they take up more of my nervous energy (draining yet also stimulating!)
than does leading the celebration.
(I do not usually prepare the weekday homilies as carefully,
so they absorb fewer emotional resources.)