

INTRODUCTION

***These considerations grew out of the need
to provide an opportunity for further quiet reflection and prayer
to parishioners who took part in
a brief introductory course on Eucharistic Ministry
conducted in one of the small faith communities in the diocese of Ballarat.***

***They are offered now to a wider audience of Eucharistic Ministers
in the hope that they may help them
to deepen their appreciation of their wonderful role.***

***More people are being commissioned to lead
Liturgies of Word and Communion
in small faith communities
that do not have the regular presence of a priest.
These reflections may be of some help also to them.***

***The reflections are likely to be more nourishing
if they are taken in small doses
and thoughtfully pondered on at leisure.***

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MINISTRY – THE CONTEXT

There is more to the Church than first appears. It is not simply a community of people united by their common faith in Jesus. Indeed, its deepest reality is mystery. The Church is alive with the life of the risen Christ and is energised by God's Spirit. Largely for this reason, St Paul calls the Church the Body of Christ. The love of Christ flows through its veins. Using another metaphor, Paul says that Christians together are the new Temple enshrining a uniquely active and life-giving presence of God.

The Church is for a purpose. As a community of believers it supports, strengthens and nourishes the inner Christ-life of each member. More particularly, it is sent forth by Christ to carry on his mission to the world. It is not that the Church 'has' Christ's mission to the world as one of its tasks. Rather, that mission 'has' the Church as one of its arms. The Church is to exemplify what a redeemed world can be like, and through its various activities to continue Christ's redeeming action in a world where Christ is already at work. Christ uses the Church to make the world a better place.

To be an effective instrument in the hand of Christ, the Church needs to be truly itself. The more perfectly it lives up to what it is meant to be as living community, the more effective it is.

According to the Vatican Council the Church is a community of persons, not just an aggregate of individuals. To be a community its members need to interact, to help each other, indeed to sometimes hold each other accountable.

The sort of community that Jesus envisaged is one that is vitally alive (*fellowship of life*), whose members are caught up in the dynamic of love (*fellowship of charity*), and who believe the message of Jesus, really trusting him, and ready to risk the consequences of their trust (*fellowship of truth*).

To be the kind of community that the Church is called to be the members are all individually gifted by the Spirit of Christ for the sake of the others. These gifts are usually the same gifts initially given to people by the creating Father and are regularly experienced as natural aptitudes, energy reserves, interests and skills. They are further enhanced by their being christened through the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist). These individual gifts are called charisms.

As well as all Christians having their particular charisms, some from among them are officially commissioned by the Church to perform certain formal roles within the structured life of the community (exercising their charisms in an official way). This officially commissioned exercise of charisms within the structured interactions of the Church is called ministry.

In brief, the Church is for a healthy world; ministry is for a healthy Church - to build up the Body of Christ.

Different epistles of Paul list some of the many charisms enjoyed in his Christian communities.

***“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God
who activates all of them in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*”**

*To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,
and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,
to another faith by the same Spirit,
to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
to another the working of miracles,
to another prophecy,
to another the discernment of spirits,
to another various kinds of tongues,
to another the interpretation of tongues.” (1 Cor.12:4-11)*

Elsewhere we find another list of gifts that may be more properly classed as ministries than as charisms:

*“The gifts (Christ) gave were that some would be apostles,
some prophets,
some evangelists,
some pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the Body of Christ.” (Eph.4:11-12)*

In his epistle to the Romans we find an undifferentiated listing of both ministries and charisms:

*“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” (Romans 12:7-8)*

THE SPIRIT OF MINISTRY – SERVICE

Ministry is a service of the community, and as such is to be understood as an exercise of discipleship. The word “ministry” expresses well this idea of service of others. In its derivation, it is made up of two words: one means to be “situated or ordered in layers”; the other means “less”. Together the words mean: to situate oneself as less than another. Accordingly, the Epistle to the Ephesians instructs all Christians to: “.. *be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” (Eph 5:21)

Ministry is not therefore so much a personal honour as the contrary: it is a service of others.

In relation to our interactions with each other in the Church, Jesus said:

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” (Mark 10:41-45)

EUCCHARISTIC MINISTRY – THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

In today's Church, one ministry that has become crucially important is Eucharistic ministry. To understand well its implications, it is necessary to understand well the Eucharist itself.

What follows applies equally to the whole congregation who take part in Mass, but it is especially appropriate that Eucharistic ministers be sensitive to what is happening when Eucharist is celebrated.

Starting Point – the Last Supper

Jesus was having his last meal with his disciples before his arrest and summary execution. During the meal, when he took hold of a loaf of bread and broke it into pieces, he said that it was his body given up for them. When he took the final cup of wine of the meal, he said that it was his blood shed for all for the forgiveness of sins.

On reflection it becomes clear that Jesus was anticipating in ritual his death that was to happen on the following day; and through their communing in the bread and cup, he allowed his disciples to be drawn into that death.

When he then said to them to continue to do the same thing in order to remember him (*Do this in memory of me*), they would renew in ritual what he had done for them and be drawn again and again into what he had done – with a significant difference: when, in succeeding ages, they remembered in ritual his death, they would also be able to remember his resurrection, because the Jesus who was killed was raised to new life by the Father, and it would be the body and blood of the since-risen Christ that they would eat and drink.

Jesus wanted them to be drawn into his death, and then to share with him in his risen life. In order to become like him in his death, Christians need to understand that death.

Jesus' Death – Why?

Jesus was killed in the most degrading, humiliating and painful way that people knew of in those days: crucifixion. Crucifixion was Rome's way of saying: You don't mess around with Rome!

To go along with what Jesus lived for would have meant a radical change in the ways people interacted. Jesus knew that all people share an equal dignity: each person is made uniquely by God, and loved deeply by God. Consequently people are to relate to each other with respect, with justice and indeed even with love.

Those who were doing well out of others not being treated with respect felt threatened by Jesus' ways of life and message. The Jewish high-priestly caste (Sadducees), particularly, and the Jerusalem aristocracy with them, (who had generally achieved their status by exploiting others), as well as those who saw the moral high-ground as their particular preserve (some of the Pharisees), wanted to be rid of him. They handed him over to the Roman imperial power on the charge of his making himself a king.

Jesus did not keep silent or tone down his message. He could have, but would not, because that would have meant being untrue to himself. He could see that the authorities would get rid of him somehow, but he also believed that God had to make sense of what he had been doing, even if they killed him.

God did vindicate Jesus' stance. God raised Jesus to life.

The deep problem for the first disciples was to make sense of Jesus' frightful humiliation and death.

Jesus' Death – the Meaning

Given the disciples' sense of the absolute specialness of Jesus, how could his death make sense? At first glance, being killed in such a degrading way as crucifixion seemed to prove that God was not interested in Jesus. However, under the influence of the Spirit, his disciples began to see meaning in Jesus' death and, indeed, a consistency with their sacred Scriptures.

Perfected through Suffering

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews believed that Jesus became perfect through suffering. Jesus' dying forced him to face up to how much he really believed what he talked about. Rather than compromise his own integrity, Jesus faced into death. In that struggle (and we get some insight into the difficulty of it from his prayer in the garden on the night of his arrest) he learnt, too, how committed his Father was to human dignity and the need to reverse the destructive dynamics of sin, injustice, coldness, etc.. He obeyed his Father, in the fullest sense of "totally agreeing with" what the Father deeply valued and the reason he sent him into the world.

In a beautiful reflection on Jesus' death, the Epistle to the Hebrews makes the following observation:

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" ... (Hebrews 5:7-9)

Jesus' death became the occasion when God "saved" him. God did not preserve Jesus from death but, precisely in the midst of death, God strengthened him to maintain his resolve. Jesus aligned himself perfectly with God's own love for humanity and was empowered to actualise his own truest potential: he was made "perfect". In turn, Jesus saves all those who "obey" him, that is, who strive in the ordinary interactions of their daily lives to align themselves with Jesus' love for humanity.

Paul embodies this idea beautifully in his Epistle to the Philippians:

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."
(Phil 3:10-11)

The Gospel of John makes the same point, but uses a different vocabulary.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Death as Sacrifice

Sacrifice was in the air that Jesus' contemporaries breathed, whether they were Jews or pagans. Sacrifice was part of the day-to-day life of everyone. The early Christians found in the idea

of sacrifice a useful means to come to terms with Jesus' death. Sacrifice is perhaps the most common image used still today to speak of the meaning of the death of Jesus.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jews for whom sacrifice was particularly sacred. Sacrifice was understood by Jews as their supreme way of engaging with God.

In a wonderful exercise of imagination, the Epistle to the Hebrews devotes whole chapters to Jesus as priest and as sacrificial victim. It views his blood in terms of the blood of purification or the blood sealing the new covenant. It speaks of his body as the altar. The language of sacrifice was used also by Paul, and is clearly found behind the words of Jesus used at the Last Supper.

John's Gospel interprets Jesus' death against the liberation background of the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. Other texts draw other meanings suggested by the notion of sacrifice.

In the light of these multiple images, we need to be cautious not to press too literally any common view of sacrifice, or to draw conclusions unintended by the original authors.

(i) sacrifice and covenant

The words of institution at the Last Supper refer to Jesus' blood as sacrificial blood sealing a new covenant between God and the disciples.

By speaking of covenant, Jesus opens people to a whole new depth of relationship with God. The term "covenant" invites all disciples to see how closely God has drawn them to himself and committed himself to them. God's love for them was such that he allowed Jesus to give his life for all. This love is not a distant, detached love. God calls them into intense relationship.

(ii) sacrifice and sin

In his gospel, Matthew referred to Jesus' blood as: "*poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (26:28)

Forgiveness can operate at two levels:

- restoration of broken relationship: reconciliation
- removal of the culture and experience of sin

The idea of the new covenant speaks to the restoration of broken relationship. Relationship is a mutual exchange. The faithfulness of God's love is never in question: people's believing that love is the problem. Jesus' death for all reveals to people the depth of God's unconditional love for them and unshakeable commitment to them, and encourages and empowers their response.

The sin of the world is humanity's doing. Loving is the practical reversal of sin. This becomes clearer with the realisation that sin is whatever is destructive of human dignity. Humanity is "saved" from this destructiveness as people heed Jesus' call to conversion and begin the work of "obeying" him, gradually attuning their minds, hearts and wills to his.

(iii) sacrifice as communing

Pagans as well as Jews understood the eating of the flesh of victims killed in sacrifice as a communing with the deity to whom the sacrifice was offered. Paul used the term "*..being partners with..*".

Writing in the context of worship of idols, Paul warned his community in Corinth thus:

“I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons”. (1 Cor 10:20-21)

Eating the flesh of Christ present sacramentally in the Eucharist was easily understood by the disciples as communing with Christ, drawing life from him who in turn drew life from God. In a context of Eucharist, John’s Gospel speaks of the disciple’s sharing Christ’s life and, in and with Jesus, sharing the very life of God:

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me”. (John 6:57)

(iv) sacrifice as thanksgiving

Animals were not the only things offered in sacrifice. “First-fruits” of harvests, bread, oil and wine were placed on the altar and regarded as offered to God and made sacred. Jewish piety frequently offered such gifts to God as expressions of thanksgiving.

During the Last Supper, as Jesus took the bread and then the wine, he gave thanks to God. He gave his life as an expression of thanks to the God whom he believed would somehow make sense of his death.

Eucharist – Here and Now Engagement

When Christians take part in Eucharist, doing in Jesus’ memory what he asked them to do, they do more than simply remember him.

They believe that, in and through all this symbolic ritual, they make present in the here and now Christ’s death on Calvary. This is the reason why the Crucifix is prominent in most churches.

They choose to do this so that they can personally join with Christ and be one with him in spirit.

The point has already been made that Jesus’ death was prelude to his resurrection and a whole new way of being alive. Jesus was never more fully alive than at that moment. Indeed, the Father climaxed his loving, life-giving, empowering presence in Jesus by raising him to fullness of life.

To the extent that Christians can make their own the stance of Jesus towards justice, inclusion, love, etc., (to the extent, that is, that they learn to “obey” him and to become perfect in the process), then they experience salvation themselves. So their lives become the training ground on which they learn to grow, through their interactions in family, workplace, and their local and broader communities.

Each time they gather as Christians to remember Jesus and to be drawn into the mystery of his death and resurrection, they remember their need to keep trying to love and to make their world a place where everyone is respected; and they draw strength and encouragement from him.

Yet Jesus does not expect people at any one moment to be perfect. He knows they give in to the easy way, often enough, and withdraw from constructive relationships. People need to die to their surface selves, in order for their deeper, truer selves to grow. But they are in process. At the Last Supper, none of the apostles was near reaching perfection. One had betrayed him, one was

about to deny him, and the rest were about to run out on him. But Jesus went ahead with the meal. And in time, most of them improved and matured in their faith and courage. The process is similar for all Jesus' present-day disciples.

Conforming themselves with Jesus in mind, heart and will leads people to a whole new experience of living.

They trust, too, that, whatever is going on in their lives,

- God will make sense of it,
- God will make good come out of it,
- God will make them more fully alive.

So they thank God for being the kind of God that God is. (Eucharist is their "saying thanks".)

Eucharist - Sharing a Meal

Nowadays, people give photos to their friends in the hope of being remembered. To remember him and what he saw as his role in the world, Jesus used no photos (or pictures) but asked his disciples to do something - regularly. The "something" was to gather together for a meal, to break, share and eat a loaf of bread and drink a cup of wine that would in fact be his own broken body and blood poured out for them. His anticipation in ritual of his threatening death took place in the setting of a meal.

To share a meal together is a common way to celebrate friendship. If a long absent friend comes to visit, people ask them to stay for a meal. To celebrate a special occasion, people go out together for a meal. Meals are about acceptance, welcome, friendship. That is the context in which Christians offer Mass.

In Jesus' mind, an appropriate way to show the mutual openness, acceptance and welcome that embody the reversal of sin, was to share a meal.

And Jesus himself assures his followers that, when they do so, he is there with them – present in his broken body and poured out blood, the price of his choice to love.

St Paul saw the unity of Christians graphically symbolized in their sharing from the one loaf.

"Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARISTIC ACTION

The Second Vatican Council made the point that, when Christians gather to celebrate Liturgy together, Christ is present among them.

The important thing about presence is the opportunity it provides for people to commune with each other. The important issue is the communication. People can be present to each other by being in the same place. Simply being present in the same place provides nothing meaningful if those present opt to ignore each other, as two passengers sitting next to each other in a train may choose. Nor is it significant if they do not realise that they share the same space because of darkness or of blindness, for example. On the other hand, they can be spatially separated but

present to each other, able to connect effectively through a telephone conversation. Yet spatial presence can assist communication, not just by voice but also by body language, gestures, expressions, etc. Persons may also be present in someone's memory. This is an impoverished presence, however, precisely because it does not allow mutual communication to happen, though in its own way it may be quite nourishing for the one cherishing the memory.

The Council mentions four different means through which Christ makes contact, and actively affects participants in the Eucharistic action. The important thing about these fourfold presences of Jesus is the varied opportunities they provide for mutual communication and growth in intimacy. In all four ways Jesus is really present – not just metaphorically, or in some vague, imagined way.

“(Christ) is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, both in the person of his minister, ‘the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross’, but most of all in the Eucharistic species.... He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings...”. Vat II, Constitution on the Liturgy, §7

The Gathered Assembly

Jesus had said: “... where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” Matt 18:20. When Christians gather to celebrate Eucharist, they are supremely gathering in his name – indeed, they gather precisely in answer to his invitation/command.

His presence is an active presence. He actively engages with them.

He touches them through the witness that they give to each other, the witness of their shared faith, hope and love, and of their experience - since faith, hope and love become real in the down-to-earth experiences of life.

The Person Of The Priest

The priest assures the identity of the Catholic community. Through ordination, the priest has been ordained/ordered/ authorised for the community.

(i) Through sharing in the priesthood of the bishop, who in turn is united with other bishops around the world, the priest inserts the local community into the broader Church and officially makes the local Church the Catholic Church.

(ii) The priest “brings into a head” and symbolises the unity of the local community in their common task of expressing in their lives their faith, their hope and their love. As all present celebrate the Eucharist, the priest is the one through whom the community is unified and through whom it “works”.

The Word Of God Proclaimed In The Assembly

Of recent years Catholics have once more begun to cherish the fact that, as the Vatican Council stated, Christ “*is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church*”. This presence of Christ in his word is a real presence. Christ is truly among his people when the Scriptures are read in the assembly.

When people listen attentively to the Scriptures proclaimed in the community, the Spirit of Jesus makes the Scriptures life-giving for them. The Spirit of Jesus inspires them, enthuses and

encourages them, guides and throws light on their lives and questions, comforts them in their struggles, discomfords them in their complacency.

There is real power contained in the Word simply proclaimed and listened to. In some of the non-sacramental Protestant Churches, the Scriptures have been the main sustaining source of the faith of their members and their commitment to the person and mission of Christ.

The Bread And Wine Of The Eucharist

(i) In the Eucharistic action, the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of the now risen Christ: they become his body (once) “given up”, and his blood (once) “poured ...for the forgiveness of sins”.

As disciples share together the bread and wine, “the one loaf and the one cup”, Jesus draws them into deeper, truer community. Together they become the Body of Christ.

As they eat and drink consciously and reflectively, he nourishes, strengthens and deepens the life of their spirit.

(ii) The Church teaches that the bread and wine are changed “really, truly and substantially” into the body and blood of Christ. The change happens to the bread and wine, not to Christ. The change that takes place in the bread and wine is what the Church sees as a change of substance. There is no other change like this one – it is quite unique. Only the substance of the bread and wine changes, everything else remains as before: taste, appearance, chemical composition, etc.

When the Church uses the word “substance”, the word has a different meaning from that used by physicists and other scientists. It does not refer to the “atoms and molecules” of the bread and wine. They remain the same after as before the Eucharistic action. What the word means is something more ordinary and unsophisticated: what we are referring to when we say, for example, “That’s bread” or “That’s cake”. We sort of know what we mean by these different terms, though we might argue over some details of the difference (or the recipe!).

(iii) Over the years, many people in the Church have come to refer to the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist simply as the “Real Presence”. To call it that is quite true, but it can also be sometimes misleading because, as has been noted, it is not his only real presence.

In fact, the purpose of Jesus’ presence to people through the bread and the wine of the Eucharist is to nourish his ongoing presence in them through his grace – it is a means to an end - and to bring them into unity, in this way making them “the Church”, which St Paul calls: “The Body of Christ”.

Jesus is also really and truly present and active when a person is baptized and thereby christened, as well as in the celebrations of other sacraments..

Reserving the Eucharist in the Tabernacle

The bread and wine have become the body and blood of Jesus, and they remain so as long as they remain bread and wine. So, when Mass is finished, if some of the Eucharistic bread or wine remains, it remains substantially the body or blood of Christ.

During the fourth century when the Christian community began to move away from private homes and to meet for Eucharist in buildings specifically erected for the purpose, it became the

practice to reserve some of the Eucharistic bread in a special repository so that it could be brought on demand to those in need and unable to attend the celebrations. This was the beginning of the custom of reserving the Eucharist in tabernacles.

During the first millennium civilised Europe virtually collapsed under successive barbarian invasions. In time these barbarians were gradually converted to Christianity, but most refrained from eating and drinking the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ because of a strong sense of unworthiness.

In place of active participation, the custom spread of praying before the sacrament reserved in the tabernacle or shown on the altar.

Whilst active and full participation in the Eucharistic action has become generally accepted by people once more, many still come at their leisure to pray before the Sacrament in order to keep fresh their sense of Eucharist, and to help themselves to appreciate more deeply the mystery in which they were involved the last time they took part in the Mass.

DRINKING FROM THE CHALICE

Jesus expressly asks his disciples to drink from the cup: *“Take this, all of you, and drink from it...”*. Jesus is as explicit in directing people to drink from the cup as he is to eat his body. He obviously wants them to do both. And he makes no exceptions; he is speaking to everyone: *“Take this, all of you...”*.

Why is this so obviously important to him? What is the meaning of drinking from the cup? What is its symbolism?

Sealing the Covenant.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians, see a profound meaning in the drinking of his blood. They refer to his blood as: *“the blood of the new and everlasting covenant...”*.

For them, to drink his blood is to pledge assent to this new covenant that God has entered into with his people.

Jesus understood that the shedding of his blood would usher in this new Covenant.

To drink the cup of Jesus’ blood is to publicly accept the new relationship that God initiates with the faith community. It is to give a definite “yes” to all that God wants to be and do to his people. Their drinking is above all a community commitment by which the communicants pledge a definite “yes” to everyone else who drinks the cup of the covenant with them. They make this commitment together, very conscious of each other’s presence and support.

Food and Drink.

John’s Gospel sees a different symbolism. For him drinking Jesus’ blood complements the eating of his flesh. The dynamic action of eating bread and drinking wine together make up one

starkly graphic symbol. Disciples eat his flesh and drink his blood, drawing life from his flesh and blood as from food and drink— an activity that shocked some of his listeners.

In their references to Jesus' Last Supper, Matthew, Mark, Luke (and Paul) do not make a point of distinguishing the complementary elements of flesh and blood. This is because for them the bread of itself symbolises his living body of flesh and blood. They do not refer to the bread simply as Jesus' flesh, but as his body. i.e., his living body, both his flesh and his blood (as well as his spiritual soul and personality).

ASSEMBLY OF THE WORD WITH COMMUNION

When there is no priest available to celebrate Sunday Eucharist, the Church invites Catholics to gather on the Sunday, to listen to the Word, to pray, and possibly also to eat the Eucharistic body of Christ reserved in the tabernacle.

Tradition

Christians have always gathered each Sunday from earliest times. Sunday is the Christian holy day (holiday) *par excellence*. Sunday is the day that Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the redeemed world.

In the earliest times, Sunday was not a holy day. For the Jews, the Sabbath (the last day of the week - Saturday) was their holy day. But every Sunday the Christians would still meet to celebrate their new identity as “resurrection people”.

With or Without a Priest

When there is no Mass on Sunday because there is no priest available, the Church still invites the local Christian community to gather and to celebrate resurrection, and, in so doing, to thank the God of resurrection - who, in the case of Jesus, brought the dead one to life, and who also, in the case of Christian disciples, makes everything work together for their good, provided they give God room.

So, whether Christians can come to celebrate Mass or not, they still gather to thank God for enabling them to grow and to become more alive through whatever has been, is still, or possibly will be, happening in their ordinary daily lives.

Catholic Identity

The Christian community needs to gather together regularly on the basis of its shared faith or else the members begin to forget who they are. If the faithful do not gather, the community begins to break down. And lone Christians, without the support of the community, in most cases gradually lose their enthusiasm and their commitment.

Resurrection People

Sometimes a priest can celebrate Mass with the local community on a day other than Sunday. This is wonderful, because the Eucharist is the focal point of their Christian lives. But it is still important that the community gather on the Sunday - because Christians are “resurrection people”.

Christ is Present

When Christians gather on the Sunday, even without the celebration of Eucharist, Christ is present with them.

He is present in the gathering, in the same way as when they gather for Mass. He is present as they pray in thanks to the Father.

He is present when his Word is proclaimed and attentively listened to and reflected on, especially when the reflection is done together.

And if the sacrament has been reserved in the tabernacle, all present can eat the body of Christ together.

Yet Still Not Perfect

Unfortunately, a simple *Assembly of the Word with Communion* falls distinctly short of the celebration of Eucharist. The action of Christ, dying and rising, is not sacramentally signified and celebrated. However, as those present eat his body “given for the life of the world”, they can still unite themselves spiritually with him in the trusting surrender he made to God on Calvary.

What they also miss out on is the special presence of Christ in the priest, who makes them sacramentally the local expression of the Catholic Church. Yet, despite the priest’s absence, since the lay leaders of the Assembly have been especially commissioned to their role and duly authorised by the bishop, the community can still regard itself as the local expression of the broader Church.

EUCCHARIST AND THE SICK

From the earliest centuries the faithful have taken the Eucharist to those members of the community who have been unable to share in the Eucharistic action themselves, due to their being unwell or even imprisoned. The sense was strong that their physical absence did not block their joining with the rest of the community as it regularly renewed its active participation through Eucharist in the death and resurrection of the life-giving Christ.

Initially members of the community took a portion of the “one loaf” from which all the disciples had eaten, a piece of the body broken for the world’s redemption, to the absentee. The absent member was generally not able to drink from the cup containing the blood of the new covenant because of the practical difficulties associated with transporting it. But the care of the community and the reality of the sense of belonging, the common commitment to their identity as the People of God, were clearly conveyed through the ministry of the faithful.

Given that the traditional day when the faithful gather is Sunday, it is particularly appropriate that those who cannot be physically present at the celebration because of ill-health or disability still have the opportunity to share in the Sunday celebration by having the Eucharist brought to them from the Mass at which the faithful have gathered. For practical reasons this is not always possible, especially when ministers have to fit in with nursing home time-tables, etc.

MINISTERING THE EUCCHARIST

Discerned

Ministries are official roles within the Church. They therefore involve more than the exercise of personal charisms. In appointing their ministers local communities need to discern those best suited for the role. Whereas local communities may encourage their members to volunteer their services for a particular ministry, the mere fact of volunteering should not guarantee admittance to ministry. The local community should authorise only those it considers to have the gifts necessary for official ministry in general as well as the gifts appropriate to the ministry in question.

Reflecting Life

Along with all believers ministers have a deep commitment to Christian living in their world of family, work and community. Since all ministers have official roles within the Church, their ministry supposes a strong and obvious dedication to the life and health of the Church. Accordingly they have a distinctive sense of belonging to the faith community and a proven record of active participation in its various activities.

Consistent with their role as Eucharistic ministers, they would clearly have a deep understanding of Eucharist, as well as an evident commitment to living its meaning in their own lives and to drawing others into a deeper Eucharistic spirituality.

Consequently, they would be welcoming persons, accepting, open and non-judgmental. Through their own faith and hope they would be life-givers to others. Sinners like all Christians, but also deeply confident of the boundless mercy and unconditional love of God, they would be compassionate.

Those who bring Eucharist to the sick and disabled would also be persons with a marked compassion and readiness and ability to listen and relate to the sick and elderly.

Worthy

Given that it is Christ who takes the initiative and invites all to eat and drink, qualms about worthiness are irrelevant, whether for the minister or for the communicants generally.

What matters is that the ministers have been called to their ministry by Christ. That call is assured by reason of their having been nominated and discerned by their faith community in a spirit of prayer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Christians are “resurrection people” who hold their heads high, certain always of the God’s deep love for them. They are not ignorant of their sin but their focus is not on their faults but on the God who loves and forgives them. Their ministry is in service of no less than the Jesus who shed his blood “for the forgiveness of all”.