

Liturgies of the Word – With or Without Communion?

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As more communities face Sundays without Mass, the question has become more acute whether the Liturgies of the Word that take its place should be celebrated with or without the reception of Communion. The Diocesan Liturgical Commission is examining this issue at present. What follows is my own effort to think aloud about some of the issues.

With regard to the question whether Liturgies of the Word should be accompanied by the opportunity for people to receive Communion, I believe there is a prior issue that is more important and that may determine to some extent our answer to the question.

My own anecdotal observation is that many people who attend Mass or take part in Liturgies of the Word do not do so from an authentic eucharistic spirituality. Whatever answer we give to the question about Liturgies of the Word with or without Communion will be quite irrelevant unless people's attitude to Eucharist is clarified.

Unless people can be encouraged to understand and to develop a true Christian spirituality and practice, and to see the connection between their Christian life and the meaning of the Eucharist, neither Mass nor Communion attached to a Liturgy of the Word will contribute to the growth of their Christian spirit. The question then whether Communion may fittingly be detached from the celebration of the Eucharist becomes a purely academic consideration, a matter of ritual or Canon Law, but not one of vital importance to our Christian life.

Common Attitudes

1. I frequently hear faithful Mass-goers say that they sometimes enjoy a Lay-led Liturgy more than they do the Mass. I have heard of others who are quite enthusiastic about a Sunday Mass that is quick and where the priest is entertaining. We live in a consumer society, and people are critical of what does not meet their expectations.

However, eucharistic spirituality is not about entertainment but meaning. Entertainment comes from without; meaning comes from within us.

2. For many people reception of the Eucharist has become a treasured devotion and to attend Mass without receiving Communion would be unthinkable. This attitude has developed only over the past thirty years since the eucharistic fast was removed and the custom of regular Confession before receiving Communion died out (largely about the time of the the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical). Recent though it is, it is deeply entrenched. For these people, a Liturgy of the Word without the opportunity to receive Communion would be seen as intrinsically deficient. What does Communion mean to them? For so many it is a very devout but totally private event.

Personal contemplative prayer is essential for genuine Christian living and provides the nourishment for a proper eucharistic spirituality, but Eucharist is not a private devotion. It is an celebration of the Christian faith community.

3. Places that have endeavoured to build or refurbish church buildings know the enormous opposition of many regular and devout parishioners to changes that better facilitate and express the spirit of the eucharistic liturgy. They want to remain undisturbed; they prefer not to see the faces of others; they resent needing to move closer to the sanctuary area. In so many big churches, people are scattered about the building, unconnected to each other like islands in an archipelago.

Genuine eucharistic spirituality fosters relationship.

Behind the Inadequacies

Automatic Grace

People undoubtedly are convinced of the centrality of Eucharist to Christian experience, but I fear that this may be due to some extent to an over-emphasised sense of its “ex opere operato” effectiveness. People can think that it will contribute to their growth in “grace” of itself, irrespective of the quality of their own interior attitudes. At the risk of over-statement, one might be tempted to think that there can be a sense of “magic” associated with it.

Exclusive Presence

Frequent references to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as the “real presence” may have been unwittingly deceptive. What the Church teaches is that the risen body of Christ is really, truly and substantially present in the Eucharist. Some have been tempted to understand this exclusively, as though Christ is not therefore really and truly present other than in the Eucharist. Everything else pales into insignificance. What is unique about the Eucharist is that the risen body of Christ is *substantially* present. But Christ is really and truly present in so many ways; and the Vatican Council itself mentioned his presence, in relation to the Eucharistic liturgy, in the gathered congregation, in the priest, in his Word.

Static Reality

Even when understood properly, we can make too much of the fact of his presence. We can view as a static reality what is meant to be a dynamic encounter.

The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not an end in itself. Christ is there to facilitate his life-giving action on us. He touches, energises and affects us through each other, through the ministry of the priest and through his Word, as well as through the Eucharistic elements. That is why he is present. As for the substantial presence of his risen body among us in the eucharistic elements, it is truly unique and wonderful, but the Gospel of John makes the point that the important response is not to “cling” to his physical body, as Mary of Magdala wished to do, but to allow him to be with his Father from where he can effectively influence us in the depths of our spirits.

The Eucharist is sacrament. It is symbol. It is a dynamic symbolic activity. To restrict the symbol to the static presence and availability to us of the body and blood of Christ is to miss Christ’s point.

Factors in an Authentic Eucharistic Spirituality

Community

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he asked us to do in memory of him what he and his disciples had done. What had they done? They had gathered as a group of “friends” to share together a meal. The prime symbol of what he saw to be the thrust of his life was people gathering together around a table as community. It was an expression of love as friendship, as *philia*. This was the reversal of sin, of the corruptive power of alienation, of manipulation, of exploitation, of personal or institutional oppression, etc.. More than that, as they gathered to share, he was there as their sustenance and nourishment in the on-going struggle against sin. He was their bread of life. By their eating and drinking his body and blood, he would constitute them as his Body.

These were the dimensions of Eucharist that were so significant for St Paul. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he challenged the Corinthians who gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Rather than celebrating as a group of friends, a genuine community of equals, the rich were discriminating against the poor and excluding them. This was to deny the meaning of Eucharist. “It is not the Lord’s Supper that you are celebrating”. Their problem was that they did not discern their true meaning and vocation to be together the Body of Christ in Corinth. As a result of their exclusivity and divisions, rather than reversing the mystery of sin, they were themselves exemplifying it. And their attitude was lethal to their Christian life.

In our ignorance of the true spirituality of Eucharist, it is easy for us Christians today to perpetuate the error of the Corinthians.

Service

There is a further dimension, of course, to his Last Supper. The bread became his body for us; the wine his blood poured out for us. His action anticipated the event of Calvary, his death for us. The Epistle to the Hebrews used the concept of sacrifice, applied in a creatively metaphorical way in the case of Jesus, to understand the thrust of this death of his. This was the expression of love as service, as *agape*.

In John's gospel, the symbolic activity recorded at the last Supper was not Eucharist, but the washing of the disciples' feet. This was an alternative expression of love as service, as *agape*.

As we in Eucharist do in memory of Jesus what he and his disciples did at the Last Supper, we too get drawn up into the mystery of love as service. An authentic eucharistic spirituality will express this.

Thankful Trust in God's Faithfulness

We can see still more in the Last Supper. Our trust in God's utter faithfulness is firmly based on his covenantal love for us. The cup that we drink together in the Eucharist is the "new covenant in my blood". Taking its lead from Jesus, authentic eucharistic spirituality is able to thank God in the midst of whatever life brings - good or evil.

Indeed, the meal of Jesus and his disciples was situated within the context of a prayer of thanks. As the Third Eucharistic Prayer expresses it: "On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise". On Jesus' part this was a fascinating act of trust in the God "who had the power to save him out of death" (Hebrews 5:7). In a context of betrayal, denial, failure and abandonment, his manner of dying was an act of faith in the God "who makes all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). In this sense Paul could state that all he wanted was to face life as Jesus faced death: "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death" (Phil. 3:10).

Mindful and active participation in liturgy, therefore, expresses, in line with the mind of Jesus at his Last Supper, an attitude of inclusive love, of service love and of thankful trust in God in the midst of life's struggles and questions.

Connecting Life and Sacrament

But how do life and liturgy connect? If life already expresses the attitudes of Jesus, is that not enough of itself? What is the point of sacrament, of Eucharist? The Council has said that the active participation in the liturgy is the summit and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit. But is actual participation in the liturgy so powerful as the Council states?

I think an answer to this question needs to be carefully nuanced. Frankly, I do not believe that our present celebrations of Eucharist function as sources of the true Christian spirit, apart from a few possible exceptions, for many Catholic people at all.

On the other hand, a number of Christian but non-Catholic Churches do not have Eucharist. (The Church would say that, apart from us, the Orthodox Church is technically the only other major Church with Eucharist.) I believe that a number of these Christians have an authentic Christian spirituality, even an unconsciously eucharistic spirituality, without Eucharist.

Sacraments are symbolic activities. In a sense they are a step back from the flow of life for the purpose of putting that life in better perspective. Because they are precisely a step back from life but very much in contact with it, they function in the realm of symbol. They provide an opportunity to express symbolically what can otherwise become routine or be taken for granted. They can heighten awareness of what is. They are a celebration of what is, provided we understand celebration not in the sense of enjoyment but of symbolically taking hold of. Enjoyment comes from immersion of the reality of the here and now. Whether a sacramental celebration is enjoyed or not is basically irrelevant. What matters is whether it significantly expresses, confirms and deepens what already is.

An illustration from married life might help. The friendship and mutual service of a husband and wife are lived out in the myriad interactions of daily life. They can become routine and be

taken for granted. If the spouses go out for a meal together on the anniversary of their wedding and the husband gives his wife a bouquet of flowers, these activities in themselves are hardly the essence of their married relationship. The meal and the gift are more a stepping back from the daily grind of mutual care. However, they are a symbolic expression of the spouses' mutual care, and an occasion to reflect on what is, to appreciate it, to freshen it, to confirm it. In this sense their gesture becomes a source of deeper commitment. Whether their relationship would continue without such ritual moments is a moot point. Certainly the symbolic celebration in itself can be quite powerful.

It is the power invested in symbol that God draws on in sacraments.

When Eucharist is a genuine celebration of a eucharistic spirituality lived in practice, it wonderfully encapsulates and serves to focus the essence of the Christian life, and in the celebration strengthens commitment to that spirituality and life.

Liturgies of the Word with Communion

I would now like to draw on these reflections to look at the question of whether Liturgies of the Word can fruitfully accommodate the reception of Communion.

Precedent

Is it theologically defensible to give Communion to people separately from the celebration of the Eucharist?

Tradition answers in the affirmative. From the earliest times Communion was brought to the imprisoned and the sick. Presumably the significance of this was to underline that their physical absence did not necessarily cut them off from the worship of the community, that they could still share in the symbolic gesture of the community, and, if they could not in fact share the meal around the table, at least they could share the food from the table and thus be one in spirit with the community and vice versa.

The practice we are contemplating at present is not quite the same. Then it was the case of an individual being drawn into the celebration of the community through reception of Communion. Today we are facing the situation of a whole community receiving Communion. I do not know if the difference is significant.

Justifiable?

Whatever about the theological defensibility of the practice, is it helpful to give Communion at a Liturgy of the Word without Mass? It is an anomaly, certainly, but can it be justified?

Provided people are clear about it, I believe that receiving Communion even apart from the Mass can still be an acceptable expression of an authentic eucharistic spirituality and life. It can be a clearly symbolic sharing of *philia* love, of openness to community, as well as of *agape* love and commitment, an expression of the Body of Christ, with the recognition that the openness and commitment are sealed by the Lord himself who cements and nurtures the gesture by the sacramental gift of his own body and blood. It can be a genuine personal "yes" to the price of love, expressed in the many interactions of the week that has been and of the week that is to come, and a profound response of thanks to the always faithful God present in all the events of life.

The fact that the receiving of Communion has been separated from the action of the Mass where the bread was consecrated may not be all that important. In saying this I refer to the pastoral situation discussed by Paul in Corinth and the question of the propriety of eating meat that had previously been sacrificed at pagan altars. Paul saw that such eating, though separated in place and time from the act of sacrifice, could very well be taken as a communion in the sacrifice. Referring to Jewish sacrifice, he wrote: "Look at Israel... where those who eat the sacrifices are in communion with the altar" (I Cor 10:18). He drew from that analogy the meaning of pagan sacrifices, but the principle could be seen to apply equally to our Christian Eucharist. Is there any reason why our receiving the sacramental body and blood of Christ not bring us into communion with the sacramental action of his sacrifice?

Confusing?

It would seem that many people do not see a significant difference between Mass and a Liturgy of the Word with Communion, and indeed sometimes in their confusion refer to the rite as a Mass. Does the confusion matter all that much?

I once thought it did, but on being challenged to explain the difference clearly to a general congregation who are not theologically literate, I found it difficult to spell out the difference convincingly. It may be a theologian's problem. My greater concern is to convince people of the essence of a genuine eucharistic spirituality and persuade them to live that. Until that is done successfully, explaining the confusion is an unneeded luxury.

Counterproductive?

Indeed, there is the strong possibility that many people, given their theologically inappropriate approach to Eucharist as a privileged time to make contact personally and privately with Jesus, could not be persuaded of the value of a Liturgy of the Word without Communion, and could choose to stay away, or at least not to prioritise it. Before they could be led to a more authentic eucharistic spirituality, they could well be lost. The approach could certainly occasion a lot of angst.

I also wonder, as is already the case in the present diocesan situation, whether a Mass celebrated only every six or eight weeks in a place, would lead to a dilution of people's appreciation of the centrality of Eucharist in our Catholic tradition. It is a risk.

Providential Opportunity

Just as the current shortage of priests can afford us the providential opportunity to confront the general passivity of many congregations, it may also provide us with the providential opportunity to address the challenge of working towards an authentic eucharistic spirituality.

I believe that many of us have been trying to do this for years, up to now with not much success.

People have got used to the ritual of the Mass. They have got used to many other secondary factors: where they sit, whom they sit near, what time Mass they go to, whether they will sing or not, even whether they will join in the spoken dialogue. Within the confines of the Mass as they are used to it, I think it is virtually impossible to educate the great majority of people to change. Besides, the official ritual of the Mass allows for very little experimentation and change of approach.

We found similar resistance to change with the First Rite of Reconciliation. Rather than adapt to change and opportunity for growth, most people simply stopped going. The Third Rite, being untried and unfamiliar, provided a wonderful new occasion for education in deepening and expanding the sense of sin. Creative approaches were tried and many of them were successful. It is unfortunate that Rome has withdrawn the permission for celebrations of the Third Rite. Rome is not likely, however, to rule out Liturgies of the Word with Communion, since it has already sanctioned them.

Perhaps Liturgies of the Word with Communion can provide a context where new things can be tried in an unfamiliar situation and people may be opened to change and to growth. This will call for creativity and imagination.

I believe the concrete possibilities for creative rituals will differ for small congregations and for bigger city ones. It will be much harder in the bigger communities.

What may be possible, particularly in the smaller communities, could be a Liturgy with real faith sharing where the Scriptures are reflected on against the background of life. People may be coaxed to do this in small groups, particularly if they were given sufficient help.

The contextualising of the reception of Communion could be based on some form of review of life, with explicit reference to:

- the experience of the life of the community and their options for inclusivity,
- the ways in which people's love has been stretched in service of others and how they have participated in the sacrifice of Christ,
- and how they have searched for the presence and call of God in the midst of their questions, joys, hopes, fears and anxieties.

This may be achieved in the manner that the prayers preceding Communion are phrased. There may, indeed, be more creative and involving ways of doing this.

Somehow or other, through really creative liturgy where familiar patterns are no longer necessary people may be led out of their private and devotional approaches to Communion and helped to see the meaning intended by Christ in his asking us to "do this in memory of me".

Conclusion

If this can be achieved by an education that leads people slowly along a path they may be more prepared to travel, then I think that the advantages of retaining Communion with Liturgies of the Word outweigh the disadvantages.