

The Future of Eucharist. New Thinking, Fresh Optimism

A Survey of Recent Publications

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At the June 1997 congress of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) in Minneapolis, an American liturgy professor and a Belgian theologian sat together during a plenary presentation on the medieval history of popular devotions and the clerical administration of the sacraments. The paper applied its historical research data to the present state of the sacraments and ministry, using the relative flexibility and gradual evolution process in the past as a paradigm for reform in the near future. This was followed by a response paper presented by another scholar which maintained the same positive, future-directed hope that the ambiguities, unrealistic dualisms and injustices with which contemporary sacramental ministry abounds will be resolved. At the conclusion the Belgian turned to his colleague and exclaimed: "But this is SO American!"

Indeed much of the discussion in recent English-language literature concerning the future of Eucharist - first, whether Eucharist as understood in classical theological categories does in fact possess a future, and secondly, how that future might be envisioned - is marked by an energy and optimism characteristic of the New World. Scientific research into sacramentological issues, or the ritual analysis of worship phenomena, is all very well but claims little credibility in and of itself apart from its consequences for the credibility of the church. Scholarly investigation is crowned, and in a sense justified, by its practical fruits.

In this article we will survey several new publications on the Eucharist, one from Aotearoa/New Zealand, the rest from the United States. The first of these consists of papers presented at a 1995 symposium at the Catholic University of America, and forms an interesting inclusio with the 1997 CTSA conference whose theme was "Eucharist for the Twenty-First Century".

1. Toward the Third Millennium

To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its Liturgical Studies program (which today includes eight full-time professors, the largest academic-year liturgy program in the United States), Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington D.C. held a two-day colloquium in September 1995 on "Eucharist: Toward the Third Millennium".¹ The choice and arrangement of texts itself vreflected an openness to different kinds of discourse on Eucharist: in the first

¹ G. AUSTIN e.a.: *Eucharist. Toward the Third Millennium* (Washington D.C. 1997).

article Stephen Happel, Chair of CUA's Department of Religion and Religious Education, sketches the historical links between liturgy and drama in order to situate the medieval mystery play performed to open the colloquium, Roland Reed's *Covenants*. The final, short article consists of Gerard Sloyan's homily at the closing liturgy: both texts thus frame the more academic structure of the colloquium itself.

Papers reprinted in this volume include Margaret Mary Kelleher's application of ritual theory in the performance (as opposed to the written rubrics) of Eucharist as ritual. Some aspects of ritual performance of Eucharist which tend to expand, perhaps even contradict, the formal text include the make-up of the assembly of worshipping subjects, the conditions of leadership (with or without an ordained presider), and the ambiguity of ritual symbols. In the field of liturgical theology Kevin Irwin looks at the proposed second edition of the *Sacramentary* in English, from a similar perspective of enacted rites, not merely written texts. He points to particular structural difficulties with the 'transition rites' (the opening rites, the presentation of the gifts, and the communion rite): the poor fit of the posture and movement of the assembly prescribed in the texts with the nature of these rites; the neglect of primal symbols; the rites' inattention to both creation and eschatology; and their overall clutter.

The application of the concept *in persona Christi* to the Eucharist has been *een heet hangijzer* particularly among American Catholic theologians in the past decade. Gerard Austin proposes four new starting points which avoid the trap of immediately identifying an ordained presider with Christ: (1) the whole celebrating Christian community, in virtue of their baptism, is the subject of the liturgical *actio*; (2) the priest must be situated within the context of the whole worshipping community whose liturgical action it is, not sharply differentiated from that whole Body; (3) emphasis needs to be shifted from the *res et sacramentum* (real presence), to the *res* which expresses unity and communion of the Body in the Spirit; and (4) presiders who tend to identify themselves with Christ at the moment of the institution narrative displace the dignity of the worshipping assembly.

Two contributions relative to the Liturgy of the Word illustrate how radically new, over the scope of history, is the restored emphasis on the Word of God proclaimed in the assembly. Eminent canon law professor Frederick McManus tells the past Vatican II history of the adoption/adaption of the Roman Lectionary by other Christian churches (and vice-versa: the lectionaries of other churches had been studied in the preparation phase of the 1969 Lectionary). There is hardly a more appropriate area of ecumenical dialogue and gradual, informal convergence, than in the place of the Word of God in worship. Mary Collins presents a thought-provoking paper on the "Liturgical Homily: Reconnecting the Body", also a remarkable development in post-Vatican II liturgical reform because the homily has no immediate model in contemporary public discourse. Collins points out that, although the term 'homily' is used in a self-evident manner in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and only in slightly more detail in documents such as *Inter Oecumenici* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the homily is in fact a highly complex form of public address encompassing biblical insight,

a liturgical event drawing the assembly deeper into the sacramental mystery, and the power to convert and to prophesy. Early Church fathers developed the homily as an alternative to the structures of classical rhetoric ill-suited to convey the power of the gospel in a familiar form in a liturgical setting. Most striking however is Collins' point that, "the genre 'homily' did not exist as a speech form among Catholic speakers of the English (...) language until 30 years ago" (p. 90). Parenthetically, the present author had taken careful notes at the 1995 conference, brought them home and blithely integrated Collins' points on the homily into the relevant section of her course lectures on the Liturgy of the Word - only to be faced with a chorus of protest from students: "But my pastor said he had an excellent course in homiletics back in the 1950's, much better than seminary students today are getting!" Perhaps the need is to distinguish 'homiletics' from 'preaching'.

The conceptual keynote of the CUA book, however, probably lies in David Power's unwrapping of the most delicate yet crucial issues, in "A Prophetic Eucharist in a Prophetic Church". The prophetic power of the Pentecost event served as a paradigm of the tremendous energy of the Spirit which poured itself out in preaching the paradox of Christ crucified and risen, and gave testimony to a well-founded hope of life for all people, freed of the power of sin and oppression. Power uses Walter Brueggemann's² distinction between 'royal consciousness', "a confidence in established institutions and traditions which are canonized (...) as the embodiment of the ideal (...) thus defended against intrusion or innovation" (p. 29), and 'prophetic consciousness', the life-giving *dunamis*. In our own time royal consciousness is disintegrating, collapsing from the inside, reflected in the church by increasing indifference among church members and, interestingly, papal apologies to groups who have historically suffered intensely from church-related oppression, such as Latin-American indigenous peoples, African-Americans and women.

What would a prophetic reshaping of Eucharist look like? Most profoundly, a celebration of Christ's self-giving and divine justice would overflow into the energy to be Christ and to make justice, motivated by the full support of the faith community. Its deep roots in the New Testament would include the death of Christ as the pivot point between history and eternity, his total self-gift in a table ritual, a reversal of master/servant roles, a shattering of the boundaries between the sacred (and thus restricted) and the everyday, and the invitation addressed to all including the most lowly. To realize the potential of the ancient ritual forms in a living contemporary faith community requires creative courage in molding ritual to fit lived experience. This touches in a practical way on the needs of communities without ordained presiders; the presence of ritual and language structures which overly differentiate presider from assembly instead of promoting communion; and a lingering concept of 'sacrifice' which tends to overshadow the Eucharist as reception of pure gift: gift of the Spirit, of the love of God, of humans embodying the presence of Christ to each other.

² W. BRUEGGEMANN: *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia 1983).

Marginalized or invisible groups and persons - women, or the sick, the unemployed, children, minorities, particularly those in pain - all speak a truth of their own which needs to be placed on the table as gift to the community.

2. Speaking of Eucharist at the grassroots

Liturgy professors speak one language to each other, naturally enough, but to engage those who faithfully attend Eucharist yet lack the (over)developed historical sense to set every change into a long perspective requires a somewhat different discourse. An eminent 'elder statesman' of sacramental theology, Bernard Cooke, has produced a slim, low-priced volume which effectively documents a foundational shift of consciousness among large numbers of 'ordinary' North American Catholics, and explains this shift in language accessible to just such persons.³

Cooke locates the most immediate causes of what he calls a change in the inner awareness of Catholics regarding Eucharist in the period since Vatican II (and the Liturgical Movement's early emphasis on educating the laity for more conscious participation) include the following:

(1) A new understanding of sin powered by greater understanding of psychological and contextual factors affecting culpability for sin; the relative triviality of most individual human sin set alongside the large-scale evils perpetrated against humanity in this century alone; a more informed understanding of the forgiving and welcoming attitude of the Jesus toward persons who are accused of sin, while condemning those who covered their sin in hypocrisy. With this background even those approaching the Eucharist today with a very basic Christian education are less likely to be motivated by fear or need to make reparation for sin by attending the Mass as a sacrifice by which the merits of Christ might be applied to them or their deceased loved ones.

(2) Linked with a more nuanced picture of the Jesus depicted in the New Testament is a heightened appreciation of Jesus precisely as human, and the Eucharist as an act of a living, if collective, memory. To go one step further, the Eucharist becomes a point of access to a personal encounter with the living, risen Christ. The participation of the laity becomes concretized in ritual action, and static practices such as eucharistic reservation limit the presence of Christ unacceptably to a physical location rather than inhering in the people of God.

(3) With the gradual disappearance in the United States of culturally Catholic ethnic enclaves in which Catholic faith and practice came packaged with one's ethnic identity, barriers collapsed which had blocked Catholics' sense of themselves as a volitional community nourished primarily by Eucharist.

(4) The power of Eucharist precisely to nourish and transform persons occurs by the quality of participation in Eucharist and its power as ritual to form and sustain the community. Alternately, such a ritual could also function to enforce

³ B. COOKE: *The Future of Eucharist. How a new self-awareness among Catholics is changing the way they believe and worship* (New York/Mahwah 1997).

patterns of authority and power of some over others, truncating its ability to promote inclusivity and full welcome.

Cooke's vision of the potential of these shifts to reshape the Eucharistic liturgy has to do with an emphasis on the intensity and authenticity of a celebration in preference to its frequency (a point arising directly from the drop in the number of available ordained presiders). The Eucharist could be freed to function as a vehicle for reconciliation by overcoming forms of marginalization, celebrate live-events and allow the type of reflection of lived experience characteristic of small-group communities. Cooke's optimism is outspoken and explicit: "The future of eucharist is exciting; it could turn out to be a period of unprecedented liturgical development..." (p. 2).

3. Issues in the Pacific

The social structure of the various ethnic groups living on Aotearoa/New Zealand represents a somewhat different 'ethnic' reality than that of North Americans whose grandparents and great-grandparents emigrated from traditionally Catholic European countries or regions. Those of ethnic European origins currently total 80%, the indigenous Maori 10%, with smaller numbers of residents from other regions in the Pacific Islands or Asia. Neil Darragh's book,⁴ written out of the context of New Zealanders of European origins, grapples in a less academic way with provocative issues than does the Catholic University text, yet he writes in a more precise and focused way than the more parish-level style of Cooke. Darragh describes and offers strategies to deal with five particular issues affecting the future of Eucharistic celebration which have emerged from pastoral survey material assembled in Aotearoa/New Zealand, specific to that context yet illuminative of the broader range of thinking:

(1) *Shared liturgical leadership*. Darragh describes a two-headed dilemma: that of the 'wooden puppet' presider who attempts little human contact, and of the overly 'interactive' presider who overpowers the liturgy with his own personality. The end result shifts the particular eucharistic worship-event from a 'ritual-centered eucharist' to a 'priest-centered eucharist' in which the worshipping community finds itself returned to a passive position in a liturgy controlled by the priest-presider and subjected to the quality of his personal performance.

Darragh makes a specific proposal for the expansion of liturgical ministries to three well-defined tasks: one minister respectively to lead the liturgy of the word, the liturgy of the eucharist, and a leader of 'liturgy of gathering and sending'. The author envisions that each of these would entail not only different functions but also different leadership capabilities. One strength of this new model, in addition to permitting more persons to image ministerial leadership instead of one solo, and perhaps idiosyncratic, performance, would be to create

⁴ N. DARRAGH: *When Christians Gather. Issues in the Celebration of Eucharist* (New York/Mahwah 1996).

greater flexibility in linking the life of the community outside eucharist with the act of celebration itself, particular through the role played by the minister of gathering and sending. (By way of comment, this intriguing proposal represents a striking departure from documented normative presidential practice at the eucharist, yet it coheres with the most recent practice of shared leadership in worship common to womenchurch groups and many base communities.)

(2) *Inclusive language*. The author identifies two issues, one expected and one more original, under the heading of inclusive language. Gender-inclusivity, sometimes broadened with the addition of other common categories of exclusion such as race or physical capacity, is supplemented here by cultural inclusivity. Particularly in a country facing its colonial history, and confronting sins perpetrated against the rights and dignity of indigenous peoples, the power of Eucharist to effect reconciliation and gather all persons together at the table requires the integration of minority languages and the silenced voices they represent. To avoid mere tokenism or a disturbing, choppy effect in worship will require some careful attention to questions such as the groups present at a particular celebration, the genre of each type of text used in worship, and the danger of unconsciously replicating the political dominance of one language over others. Darragh reports that some leaders of eucharistic liturgy routinely use a Maori trinitarian formula, not only to recognize the indigenous status of the Maori people, but also because the formula in their language is already gender-inclusive (p. 39 note 1).

(3) *The relevance of liturgical language*. The problem here concerns both the relatively opaque or archaic nature of much formal language used in liturgy, as well as the gradual, insidious cheapening of common language (trivialities, advertising) used outside worship. Possibilities for the creation of a more authentic and life-giving speech in ritual include diminishing the preponderance of 'read words' over 'said words', avoiding the use of clichés or outdated expressions particularly in spontaneous (as opposed to prepared) prayer, and controlling the quality of translations.

(4) *The inculturation of symbols and calendar*. What happens when Christians in the Southern hemisphere ask hard questions of the normative symbol systems developed in line with the Northern festal calendar affects far more than the basic Sunday eucharistic liturgy. There are in fact several schools of thought on the inculturation of the liturgical year, ranging from moving all the dates, to treating the Easter and Christmas cycles differently due to their differing historical status, to searching out locally appropriate seasonal symbolism within the seasons of each pivotal feast of the year. Darragh, to avoid replicating a split between natural and historical symbols parallel to a creation/history split, proposes affirming the particular nature of the Southern hemisphere: the spring Advent celebrates new lush growth, while the 'Sun of Justice' whose birth is celebrated at Christmas is imaged in a strong, full but not yet malevolently blazing sun. Easter becomes a season of 'darkness and meantime', while the Lenten period of purification is reflected in the impending autumn as a season of letting die what needs to die, in order to be reborn.

(5) *With whom and how often to celebrate eucharist*. These are two separate

questions: 'with whom' refers to the composition of the worshipping community, ecumenical openness and the possibilities of communication across language and cultural barriers. The question of 'how often' can mean eucharist less often than weekly, a practice familiar to most Protestant congregations but for Catholics generally necessitated by a dearth of ordained presiders. The author posits that 'all liturgy is negotiation', a process of dialogue and progressive understanding among different groups within the worshipping community in order to uncover distortions and patterns of exclusion, and to permit eucharist its radically converting and life-giving power.

4. Some common themes

Among these three texts or collections of texts,⁵ in addition to the particular points summarized above, one distinguishable theme has to do with the *inculturation* of the eucharistic liturgy. Neil Darragh's book offers a thought-provoking excursion into the dynamics of liturgical inculturation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the struggles to 'make it fit' when the liturgy was designed in a wholly different context, that of the inherited customs of New Zealanders of European descent. David Power had written extensively on inculturation,⁶ while Cooke wisely reminds his readers that " (...) our concern about Catholic life in North America is clearly important, for us who live here but also because of the immense impact... that all things 'American' have on the rest of the world; *but* we are not the whole church... Much of the future of Christianity and specifically of its worship life lies in what we characterize as the Third World" (p. 8). This then attempts to relativize any assumption of the normativity of American faith practices for the rest of the world, an assumption all too often made unconsciously by citizens of the United States, and just as often taken as an offense by citizens of the rest of the world.

Another significant issue which forms much of the discussion on eucharist, but most explicitly comes to the fore in Kevin Irwin's article, involves the diminishing (at least in the hyperactive, overstressed West) frequency of the family meal. When the whole family rarely gathers for a relaxed meal with conversation around a familiar table in the home, the relevance of the paradigm of eucharist as family meal is diminished and comes to reflect an idyllic vision rather than a practical element of daily life raised to paschal significance. (Add to that the violent split on a global scale concerning food as a value, between the scarcity of food and the expropriation of farmers' lands in the developing world, and the preponderance of high-cholesterol artificial junk food and obsessive

⁵ While some of the presentations and points made at the 1997 Catholic Theological Society of America congress on "Eucharist for the Twenty-first Century" further illuminate the issues presented here, no attempt will be made to summarize the presentations in order to permit the definitive texts of the papers to appear in final published form. The major plenary sessions included Mary Collins: "The Eucharist and the Church", Gary Macy: "The Eucharist and Popular Religiosity", and John Baldovin: "The Eucharist and Ministerial Leadership".

⁶ See especially D. POWER, *Worship. Culture and Theology* (Washington D.C. 1990).

diating characteristic of the Northern/Western world.)

Nonetheless, there is often subtle evidence in the texts of a deep underlying discomfort with the practical question of eucharistic presidency: who is eligible to preside, will there be enough of them to cover the number of eucharistic communities, and can they be drawn from the local culture or must they be imported from elsewhere to accommodate personnel shortages? Cooke among others insists that this does not point to a looming crisis for the West, while one might add at the same time that a proliferation of priestly vocations in Africa and Asia does not necessarily affirm the traditional Western paradigm of priesthood. In this regard the clearly optimistic tone of the discussions on eucharist contrasts brilliantly with the somewhat more somber undertone of the reality of eucharistic presidency in the foreseeable future. The academic discourse acknowledges the seriousness of the issues, boldly puts forth new ideas for reform, trusts in the good sense of the community of believers and in the presence of the Spirit, and embodies its own form of eschatological hope.

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