Worship in the Absence of a Priest

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While much attention has been given to the pastoral dimensions of lay presidency at communal worship there has been insufficient attention to the theological aspects of the issue. The author, a noted sacramental theologian, suggests that reflection on the forms that worship takes when no priest is available can provide lessons for understanding the important role of popular devotion in Catholic identity. We may also learn what might be improved within sacramental celebrations when a priest does preside.

The intent of this essay is a theological reflection on the practice of worship with lay leadership and presidency. Above is the title given to me, probably not untouchable to the editors' mind but descriptive of the problem posed, for which reason I have kept it. One might prefer to speak of communities worshipping without the presence of priests, but we do have in hand the SWAP document of the Roman Curia (Congregation for Divine Worship, Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, 2 June 1988) and the insertion into some liturgical books of rites to provide for ceremony under presidency of designated laity.

Here We Stand

From where I am now writing, on an island in the South Pacific, to speak of worship in the absence of a priest seems tautological, given the fact that worship, even Sunday worship, often means people gathering together for service, without thought of priest, since none is readily available. Special efforts may

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be made to have one at Easter and Christmas, occasions when he may supply some of the sacramental rites that are regularly missing or that have been left over to await his visit, such as baptisms and marriages. But for the most part, from Sunday to Sunday, the people get along with their locally appointed ministers, knowing that they cannot regularly expect a priest. A Sunday with a priest is an exception rather than a rule.

For Sundays, according to canonical and liturgical provisions, this means either a communion service, though communion is often not available, given physical conditions of movement and travel, or a service of the Word. When one pays closer attention, however, it is seen that much of the prayer life of the people, and their sense of God, Christ, and Mary, is supplied by popular devotions, granted that these may be at times linked with the liturgical. Examples of such a link occur when, on Good Friday, the reading of the Passion is inserted into a Way of the Cross, or, on a Sunday, when the preparation for communion is the rosary with scriptural readings interspersed. The most common devotion is often that of the rosary, not always shared by parish communities as such but within prayer groups. Actively apostolic associations, such as the Legion of Mary, have their own prayer manuals. Preaching or instruction by lay leaders is common. Charismatic prayer, with its own regularized forms of chant and ritual gesture, is increasingly popular. Where the reserved sacrament can be made available, services of adoration provide the primary link with the Eucharist.

When, in such places, there is a eucharistic celebration with a priest presiding, the participation will be intense, the singing strong, the preaching long. The priest must then meet with the community leadership, visit schools, make his rounds of the territory, bless homes, bless boats, bless the sick, bless medals, bless recently baptized babies, perform marriages, often for couples already living together. Though his presence is rare, he commands great reverence, for both his occasional visit and the blessings he leaves behind provide a link with the larger world and with an added touch of the holy.

Such indeed is the profile of worship and prayer of many a Catholic community across the world, each with its own particularities. Since Vatican II, there has been more official recognition of lay leadership, more effort to train and prepare ministers for worship, more extension of powers to celebrate such sacra-

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ments as marriage and baptism, or to conduct funerals. But the devotional forms of worship above described remain the primary characteristics of Catholic religious practice. If there is an area in which Protestant and Catholic converge and even share, it is in charismatic prayer, more rarely in a service of the Word.

Why then should worship in the absence of a priest suddenly appear as a specific sacramental and pastoral issue? Is it because countries, especially in Europe and North America, accustomed to having priests and even sending missionaries, and determining liturgical directives around the world, are now experiencing a sacramental penury?

To look at the matter purely as an issue of sacramental availability may be to miss the issues brought to surface when the question is raised. A deeper concern is surely that of a Catholicism that has long been ordered and nurtured in nonliturgical but highly ritualized fashion, something that may escape attention when priestly liturgies are available. While a theologian may decry the lack of a sacramental core to worship because the sevenfold cannot be celebrated, communities have provided their own sacramentality and their own deeply affective piety through tangible realities such as blessed water, images, medals, stations of the Cross, rosary beads, relics, holy places, and the like. The report on Holy Week and Easter, last April 2001, in the local Tahitian newspaper featured preaching as the highlight in the Evangelical Protestant churches and outdoor Stations of the Cross as marking the observance of Catholic parishes across the islands of the archipelago, somehow focusing such reporting on papal ceremonies on Good Friday night at the Coliseum in Rome.

The identifying characteristic of the Catholic was thus made clear: The devotional practice of following the cross, found around the world, including in Rome, with the Pope in attendance at the Coliseum, assumed a scene of the heroic stand of Christian martyrs. (In fact, last Good Friday, Pope John Paul was too fatigued to follow the Cross.) Center and periphery converge in an emotive and tangible piety, both touching the desire for pardon and touching off a deep empathy with Jesus in his passion. Rome, ancient Palestine, remote Pacific islands bathed in sunshine, and dark forests of Africa all witness the same communion with Christ in his suffering. In many a Catholic community, while regard for the sacraments is not missing, such devotional activity of lay communities, when seen as more than a local, even when inculturated, phenomenon, identifies

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them more readily than properly sacramental action. Which may well go with the fact, of course, that when celebrated, the golden “seven” are strangely lacking in the tangible and sensuous. One would think that water and oil were in short supply to witness the actual celebration of baptism in many parishes, even in some parishes in the noble city of Washington, D.C.

Approaches

In the face, then, of worship in the absence of a priest as the prior lot of a community or parish, three approaches are taken, though in unequal measure, according to the kind of questions that are asked. A common, one might say curial, approach is the canonical, an effort to meticulously spell out what may be done according to law and to assure the proper flow of appointment and delegation, and to prevent the leaders of communities from performing rites that are ascribed exclusively to priests. This usually has to do with eucharistic services without consecratory words, and services of penance without absolution from sin, or blessings of elements and persons markedly distinct from those prescribed for clergy, though in one rather odd instance where lay persons were delegated to perform baptisms and marriage liturgies, they were prohibited to perform funeral rites. The dead, it seems, belong to priests. Lay presidency extends even further as liturgical books are revised. In more recently published rites for baptism and marriage, there are texts to be used by lay ministers in blessing water and blessing couples, but they are different from those to be used by priests. Though early tradition would seem to suggest that it is a theological possibility, as yet no provisions have been made for anointing of the sick by lay ministers or family members.

In a second approach, the liturgist and the theologian may raise issues of sacramentality, with an eye on what is doctrinally defined as such, and in many cases will proceed to queries about the prevailing norms regarding candidates for ordination, norms which, it is seen, severely limit the number of priests and so the availability of full eucharistic celebration. That this requires critique is not without question, and it is odd that the Church appears to enhance its image and its influence through the “sacrament” of celibacy rather than through the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. One suspects that hierarchies and control are as much at issue as celibacy.

Liturgists may, of course, mete out their own imbalance. Some authors argue that it is better to prefer liturgies of the Word to communion services since the congregation does not thus receive communion in its own offered bread and wine, thus putting the accent more on the offering than on the gift received. Elsewhere, I have written of ritual action that may enhance and broaden eucharistic
services of communion, as long as new disciplinary measures on ordination are not taken (Power, 1998, 143–45, 151–52).

But the issue requires a third approach and invites the attention of another field of inquiry. The Catholic accustomed to the absence of priest and Eucharist stakes identity in what is commonly available, and very tangible and corporal. Even when there is a desire for a more frequent Eucharist, this might be focused more on presence to the ocular than on presence to the gift to be received. The accentuation of devotional activities is not so surprising, since what you have always with you is what you may tend to value. This is especially true if it allows a ready integration of traditional and cultural values, rituals, and beliefs. Taking note of the symbolic and the tangible in communities that worship regularly without priests may provide the occasion to consider what is lacking in liturgically exact celebrations where priests preside, and help Church leaders to see what elements of popular devotion need to be kept alive, even in acts of worship which properly give more place to Scripture.

The tendency to attach added devotion to the institution narrative in the eucharistic prayer is, in fact, quite widespread, even today. It is curious to note how some celebrants today, in different parts of the world, use the “consecration” of the Mass to display strong elements of personal piety, with prolonged elevations and genuflections. It is also interesting to see how many churches in Africa, Asia, and Oceania still adorn these moments with the ringing of bells, the offering of incense, and walk-on roles for altar servers with torches. One may find this odd and nontheological, but it speaks to the absence of the sensuous in the use of the more properly sacramental elements.

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, when priests were still plentiful, many congregations in the United States followed through with the insights and ordinances of the council in turning from the devotional to the liturgical as anchor and center of parish life. This was good but too much was jettisoned. Now, forty or so years later, such parish communities have neither the identifying devotional piety to help them along nor the priest to assure the Eucharist. In such a situation, with services of the Word to the fore, parishes may well slip into the traditions of the nonsacramental forms of some Protestant worship, with a focus on word and

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hymn singing, and a rather reduced appeal to the tangible and sensuous. No value judgment is intended in this remark on the choice between Protestant and Catholic. It is merely a concern about change of identity, together with the question whether, in ecumenical unity, it is still a good idea to preserve specific, nonoppositional identities.

In such a developing situation, for the sake of a broadened perception of sacramentality and the symbolic, it seems worth asking about the significance of a Catholic devotion—personal and communal—centered on holy things, on the Lord's Passion, and a fine attunement to the presence of the saints and communion with the dead, all off-center liturgically perhaps, yet vivid and nourishing. Would it have been possible to keep some of this alive, along with more attention to the ancient Church tradition of the Sunday Eucharist wherein all participated, by word, rite, and consumption or consummation? In other words, is the situation now developing in such countries as France, the United States, and Canada made somewhat worse by reason of too ready a jettisoning of Catholic devotions thirty or forty years ago?

One fears that with the official delegation of lay ministers to celebrate eucharistic services and sacraments such as baptism and marriage, and with a careful curial monitoring of such ceremonies, attention to the sacramentality of popular devotion may be banished, even from communities that worship in the absence of priests. Presenting position and counter-position, as I have done above, is a way of raising the question about retaining and promoting elements of communal sacramentality both in worship in the absence of a priest and in worship with ordained ministers presiding. In other words, is there anything to learn from this position and counter-position about specifically Catholic approaches to “sacramentality”? [It is also to be noted that in religion of the occult and in charismatic prayer many of the elements associated otherwise with popular religiosity surface in a different manner; for example, the sense of an unarticulated life force, a focus on healing, rhythmic incantation, a search for identity with the cosmic.] Indeed, to provide more ready access to ordination and a more available Eucharist without raising this question may lead to greater grief and a gradual loss of a distinctive Catholic identity. This would be regrettable for the reason that as churches move toward greater communion, the marks of specific identity need not be divisive but complementary, as well as respectful of historical traditions.
Worship and Popular Religiosity

To raise that question is, inevitably, to ask for more understanding of what is dubbed popular religiosity, with its survival of cultural instincts in devotion and, indeed, in a secular society, in new religious practices of a post-Christian era. Does there not exist a compatibility or intersection of such devotion with sacrament? Thus we encounter the ambiguous quality of making canonical and liturgical provisions for worship in the absence of a priest: on the one hand, the possible move to a liturgy of the Word, deprived of its sacramental counterpart, and on the other, a sacramentality that is not integrated with what is liturgically and theologically acknowledged as a sacrament that belongs within the economy of Church tradition.

From early times, a Catholic sacramentalist would argue, the sacramentality of official and traditional rites was imbedded in a larger sense of the sacramentality of creation and incorporated elements from it. Despite the notions of original sin and of a creation flawed by human fault, Catholics are, on the whole, persuaded that finite creatures still express the wonder and glory of God, and put us in touch with the holy and with God. They are the issue of a gracious act of gift that transcends them completely but brings them and us into communion with the divine. Hence, creatures, such as bread, wine, oil, water and light, as well as incense, fruit, images, medals, and lamb’s cloth, in showing forth the life and wonder of the world and of human being, have a divine significance and are suffused by divine life. It is on this account that when Christ came to redeem the world through human flesh, he attended to creatures of the earth, integrated them into the mystery of his Incarnation and into the proclamation of his mystery of salvation. Even now, within his Church, he continues to be present among his followers, and continues to sanctify them, by joining the words of his Gospel to these creatures. It is in the conjunction of word, creaturely element and ritual, that the sacraments are the signs and the efficacious action of Christ’s grace, in and through the congregation and the ministry of his Church.

However, this attention to the broadly sacramental, to the dwelling of the divine in the earthly, to the invisible made accessible in the visible, the untouchable in the touchable, emerges in special forms in popular devotion, especially perhaps after disturbed notions of the sacred made creaturely elements less...
accessible in sacramental action. I hesitate to repeat here the complaints about uses of bread, wine, and oil that show little resemblance to their common use in human life. The practices of common piety seem to center around awareness, not of the didactic of the sign, but of the symbolic play and interplay of life forces. There are living forces within creation, a wide communion of all things, and of the human with all things, a communion indeed that incorporates both the living and the dead. Practitioners of this form of religion are not usually articulate, and this is not said pejoratively, about the meaning of their customs, except under pressure, when what is said may not fully meet the unsaid of what is done.

To illustrate this, one might take an example from practices of remembering the dead. On the fringes of liturgical renewal, we have not completely lost the practice of offering Masses for the dead in return for stipends. Such devotion to the “souls in purgatory” may be explained as expression of the desire to save them from suffering, but there is more than that to this way of keeping communion with the dead. Once, on seeing a group of fairly young adults meticulously keeping count of Mass cards left on a deceased brother’s coffin, I probed their belief in purgatory, to find that it was practically nonexistent. For them, Mass cards stood in for remembrance and a continued communion with a dead brother that others were prepared to share. They had not “thought about it” but this was, seemingly, what it meant.

Many sorts of devotion draw us through the senses into a communion with the living forces of creation and a communion with the dead. Repetitive and rhythmic rituals of body movement and short ejaculatory word embody this sense of shared life force and the attempt to release it, to assimilate it, or to enter into it. It is a mistake, indeed, to eliminate repetition from liturgical celebration for didactic reasons. The relation of what is distinctively sacramental and paschal in the proclamation of the Word does, of course, need to stand out, but not at the expense of other factors. The sacramental rituals proper, within this broader configuration of vital, divinely-given forces, focuses attention on the Word Incarnate as center and redeeming point of this gracious and grace-filled reality, making room for a creativity that is freeing and salutary. This sense of the creative entering into the popular and traditional expression of the holy and the sacred is the moving force in openness to inculturation.
In short, circumscribing Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest too rigidly, even with the desire to enhance the communication of the word, may silence the sacramental of devotion and piety that is still, for Catholics, a distinctive way of relating to even deeper instincts of the holy, found well beyond the Christian. Keeping this to the fore is a contribution to be brought, without shame, into ecumenical dialogue as well as into liturgical renewal.

From this perspective, sacramentality is not primarily to be seen as the exercise of power but as communication within an order of symbolic exchange. Nor is what is called validity to be confused with reality, as though no reality existed outside the boundaries of what legislation, for good reason it may be, canonizes as valid. Something is realized in every exchange of symbols. Even without an ordained minister, Christian people gathered to keep memory of Christ engage in a symbolic exchange, so that is represented in a shared sharing in the reality. Prohibiting designated lay ministers to pronounce the words of the Supper does not render null the pronouncement of these words, nor would their pronouncement of these words be inefficacious, once it were embedded in a blessing and an appeal for the sending of the Spirit. A curial approach may look at it this way, but the main signification—I do not dare to say intent—of the prohibition is, in fact, to underline the absence of an ordained minister, and in that sense to highlight something vital and life giving that is missing within the symbolic exchange, that is still open and possible to the gathered assembly. From such an angle one might well speak of differences of degree and completeness in the realization of symbolic exchange and the sacramental reality.

In the symbolic exchange, then, it may be said that, without too much rigor of classification, there are two sets of symbols or prayers, materials, acts, things. One comes from liturgical tradition, as it is known mainly through the history of liturgical books and testimonies. The other comes from the domain usually dubbed popular religiosity or popular devotion. In the past this area of symbolic exchange was, at times, partly incorporated into liturgical books, as in the adoption of the Veneration of the Cross into Good Friday liturgies, and partly into liturgical action, as when people recited the rosary during Mass, but mostly it was kept in a separate domain.

The world of popular religiosity has a number of significant referents, within its forms of expression found more in rhythmic repetition and corporal action.

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than in well-developed verbal articulation. These referents belong largely to the daily and seasonal passage of time, and to life lived at the level of family and neighborhood, inclusive of the living and the dead. Its primary referents may be said to be the life force that penetrates all reality and is embodied in it, and communion in this life force, a communion of the living and a communion of the living and the dead, or humans and other things of God’s creation, be they so-called living things or mountains, forests, winds, breezes, rivers, and oceans.

**Keeping Memory**

A theological underpinning for a retrieval of this kind of symbolic exchange is found first in a theology of graced creation, as already mentioned. Second, it comes from a grasp of the functioning of memory and integration of the past into a lived sharing and future hope, through keeping memory. Sensitivity to this is of help in promoting and monitoring worship of communities without priests.

Treating of memorial, it is customary to state that the past event of Christ’s Pasch is made present through the power of Word and Spirit, and that the congregation is also present to a future imagined in the hope of the resurrection and a Second Coming. When we are able to escape from categories of cause and effect, and ontologically or corporeally conceived images of presence, we can tackle the issue of effective memory more fully (Power, 1991, 42–51, 304–16). On the one hand, we see that past events present themselves through recital, proclamation, and imaginative configuration. That is how they get inserted into memory, intention, hope, and effective action. Certainly, such presencing is enacted in any congregational gathering when the tale is told, blessings are pronounced, and symbolic exchange is engaged. A priest is not necessary for this.

Remembrance also gives us another way of measuring time and, within time, of reconfiguring being in communion. Trying to describe the Judeo-Christian sense of time, it is often said that it is measured by *kairos*, not *chronos*. That is to say, the time of our life and the time of history are calculated in terms of divine irruptions and not of chronometers and calendars. This is not simply because God acts when God wishes, but it refers, as it were, to a heaped up energy in happenings that are describable as divine interventions. This energy is stored up in our life-world and spread out across chronometric time in a way that invites living by another standard and with a different hope.

Within the memorial of Christ, saints are remembered, other past events are remembered, and indeed all the dead may be remembered as now living from this divine grace and energy. The liturgical calendar allows for this but it seems more vibrant in devotions of different sorts. Popular forms of keeping memory focus
on this stored energy, allowing indeed each deceased, in varying degree, to
remain a source of energy that beats the clock and the calendar, as well as
tranquilizing the more malign spirits that disturb time and space for pernicious
purposes. It is within a greater life force that is beyond our measurements that
we live in communion, accede to a different sort of time, and, within it, commune
across the grave.

How do common memories and the common memory of Christ converge in a
reconfigured image and reality of life and presence? Sacramental and liturgical
theology do not seem to address this much but the strategies of popular remem-
brance may tell us more. From the practices of confraternities and Good Friday
devotions in the later Middle Ages we may find some directions. What can be
noted, in particular, is the chanting of lamentation, or a passion play giving large
place to Mary’s lament over her dead son, and the procession of the icon of the
dead Christ through town or village, grieving mother in tow. This was an age of
plague, famine, war, and death on a massive scale, in which many a son, support
of a widowed mother, was lost. Into the lament of Mary for Christ, all such
memory, all such grieving could be incorporated.

Today, outside urban centers or in certain urban coalitions, funerals are oddly
joyous events, with the dead person paradoxically very much alive. Families and
neighborhoods seem to find themselves anew in grieving and in remembering
their dead. Memories are expressed in story and song, symbols of living pres-
ence are used, such as objects expressive of life placed on a coffin, or places set
for a deceased at table, or food put on graves. Once in a rural area of a materially
poor country, I witnessed a funeral procession, a baby’s body in a white home-
made coffin carried on a bicycle, stop by a church for prayer and song, and then
move on to the graveyard, where rice was left upon the tomb as people departed
homeward. Had the community’s priest been at the church, they would, I was
told, have asked a blessing for the remains, possibly even a Mass. But the priest
was not present, so the people simply went ahead with their own rituals, forged
over many centuries, remembering and grieving and hoping in time-honored
fashion. I was also told that the community had held off burial for many days so
that all relatives and all connected with the deceased or family could be present.
It is hard to disseminate energy among the absent.

Keeping memory without the consolation of a body to reverence is becoming
more common in this time of violence, but it was, for centuries, a feature in time of
war, earthquake, and shipwreck. After the tragic violence, destruction, and
death in New York on September 11, 2001, people turned out in large numbers
with lighted candles to keep memory alive and to keep hope alive. The dead
could be named, their stories remembered, a sense of life maintained amid the
loss and the fear. This may have been, in large part, a more secularized form of
remembrance, whatever the massive participation of varying religious groups,
but it points to a similar sense of the popular. Is the chance of the future to be
measured in terms of the fear of terror, or in terms of the stored up energy that comes to the fore in acts, both words and symbols, of remembrance?

Whenever we think of arranging forms of worship “in absence of a priest” so as to give more room to the proclamation of Scriptures, well-scripted words, and a more decent place for whatever sacramental signs are available, we cannot afford to pass over these popular and cultural forms of keeping memory of the past, of the living dead, and of Christ. These are the stuff of popular piety’s contribution to a more invigorated and invigorating sacramental worship.

The Absent and Sometimes Present Priest

Within all of this, the role of the ordained priest is redefined. When he arrives irregularly on the scene, he appears, by people’s expectations, largely in the role of teacher. The people should be able to look to him for explanations of the Scriptures that have eluded them, for help in keeping their catechizing abreast, or resolving community issues that require sapiential judgment. It is the presence of Christ and the Spirit, through the tradition and transmission of the Word, which comes to the fore, transmitted and shared, of course, within a living apostolic communion. In line with this, the priest is also representative of a larger Church, a greater communion. He brings into a people’s midst another presence, not simply that of Christ as some theology might say, but of the Body of Christ, head and members, in a wider configuration of communities in communion.

Conclusion

Taking up the issue of worship “in the absence of a priest” proves to be the occasion for a reflection upon various aspects of the sacramental in Catholic tradition and piety, provided we do not start with ready-made definitions of sacrament and decent worship. Such reflection helps both pastoral care for such gatherings, and maybe the invigoration, in more open ways, of regular forms of sacramental worship, more likely to integrate elements that people bring, as well as formal liturgical tradition. In the end too, it helps priests to define their role when responsible for a number of communities left without a resident priest.

References
