Issues Around Eucharistic Practice

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Understanding the theological foundations for liturgical renewal envisioned by Vatican II can help us grapple with the current tensions in our liturgy and move beyond them with hope.

The current state of liturgical life in the Church is marked by theological tension and competing practices. Recent documents from Rome like Redemptionis Sacramentum (On Certain Matters To Be Observed or To Be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist) are marked by a change of tone and vision with regard to liturgical celebration and ongoing renewal. The return to a view of liturgy as rubrics and the sharpened distinction between the ministerial priest and the lay faithful are indicative of deeper theological tensions. According to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963, hereafter CSL), the entire celebration of the Eucharist, rather than only the words of institution, is an expression of the Eucharistic faith of the Church. And so, we can say that the deep pattern of the celebration of the Eucharist—the Liturgy of the Word, Eucharistic Prayer, and participation in Bread and Cup—is a text-in-action (see Ricoeur, 197–221) that is both a model of what we believe and a model for what we believe and its ethical implications (see Geertz, 87–125). Each of us reads and interprets every facet of the Eucharistic celebration from our subjective perspective, that is, the understanding that we bring to our participation. It is, therefore, not surprising that there should be such a wide range of reactions among pastoral ministers to the recent documents and directives pertaining to this central act of worship. What are some of the sources of these tensions?

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This moment in the reception of the reforms of Vatican II provides persons on the presumed theological “right” and “left” with the occasion to engage in a kind of “archeology,” an uncovering of the web of assumptions that underpins any directive regarding liturgical practice. Indeed “excavating” the theological sources of these assumptions-in-action enables us to discern their value in relationship to current biblical and liturgical scholarship, and to refocus our attention on the implications of our being in Christ together for the peace and salvation of all the world. To that end, the following presents a brief narrative lens on the various dispositions in our current situation. It will reflect on a few contemporary issues within Eucharistic practice today, in particular: the development of an historically critical worldview, a renewed understanding of sacramental causality, and a more adequate grasp of the relationship of the ministerial and universal priesthood. This process enables an unearthing of some of the theological foundations of pre-Vatican II practice and theology.

A Lens on the Present

Many of us formed in the faith before 1962 had the impression that any question worth asking and answering was somehow contained in the Baltimore Catechism. Since Vatican II many Catholic theologians have pointed to the rationally alluring characteristics of this question-answer format with its crisp categories of analysis. As a result, many of us presumed that the metaphysical assertions regarding the change of bread and wine—the substance changes while the accidents remain the same—lucidly explained the truth of the words attributed to Jesus in the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper. We assumed that, if we could not understand this assertion in this life, we would be able to understand it in the Beatific Vision.

In the period prior to the reforms of Vatican II, most Catholics understood the word Eucharist to refer to the sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, exposed for adoration, or to be received (note the passive voice) at Mass, and referred to the “words of institution”—“This is my body” and “This is my blood”—as the key moment of importance. The theological isolation of these words of the ministerial priest in scholastic and neo-scholastic theology led to theological and catechetical neglect of the role of the other members of the liturgical assembly, as well as to the neglect of the meaning of the proclamation of the Scriptures and homily, of the origin and meaning of the entire Eucharistic Prayer (Canon), and of the ethical implications of participation in Bread and Cup. Thus, even though ministerial priests were often discouraged from celebrating without anyone else present, the practice of the “private Mass” continued. The Missal of Paul VI contained what we could call a performative oxymoron, Missa sine populo (Mass
without people), a vestige of the scholastic theological system. That classical worldview and ecclesiology, captured in the image of a pyramidal hierarchy with the ordained ministers in the higher ranks, could then readily claim that ministerial priests are the “full church,” each an *alter Christus* (another Christ) acting in the person of Christ now seated at the right hand of God (Rorem, 19–30).

Others of us only know the celebration of the Eucharist since Vatican II. During these years, we have struggled to retrieve the New Testament foundations of the full celebration of the Eucharist as an action of all the priestly people, each according to our relationship to the other members of the liturgical assembly. Only with the combination of the data of the biblical and liturgical movements, each with its own stages of development (Ostdiek, 38–48), can these exclusive emphases on the actions of the ministerial priest and on “the moment of consecration” be contextualized within the wider Catholic theological tradition.

These two broad pre-and-post Vatican II experiential bases explain in part the tremendous variety in the attitudes, questions, and concerns surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist and related devotional practices. Further, the rise of feminist consciousness on the part of both women and men and the growing awareness that scholastic theology can not adequately articulate the faith of the Church in our postmodern world lend added poignancy to the description of the current situation of many of us as “standing in a crucible,” a place in which disparate concerns meet over intense theological heat.

It would be an understatement to say that the celebration of the Eucharist is the public, social activity of the Church in which every major issue in Catholic Christian life is manifest and wrestled. For example, arrangements of chairs, the location of the tabernacle, baptismal font, and ambo, and concerns about lay ministries and female acolytes are all rooted in one’s image of the Church. Moreover, the desire for certain devotional practices, such as perpetual adoration, gives insight into the effectiveness of the promulgation and reception of the liturgical reforms. Indeed, the celebration of the Eucharist has become a crucible in which some persons stand creatively, while others flee, considering it beyond hope of reform.

To be sure, whatever our questions and concerns, they are indications of the deep, unspoken, controlling assumptions about the meaning of being baptized.
into the one priesthood of Christ in this Church at once holy and sinful. They are lucid clues to persons’ actual understanding of the Eucharist and of participation in it with integrity.

Some Contemporary Issues

Historical Consciousness

Human thinking is increasingly marked by ever expanding historical consciousness. Philosophers, scientists, and theologians speak of “paradigm shifts,” that is, changes in the models people use to make sense of reality. Clearly, the contributions of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton challenged the authority of the prevailing view of reality that supported classical philosophy and theology, and, therefore, challenged the current understandings of the relation of God to creation, if the notion of God was preserved at all (Wildiers, 83–129).

From the sixteenth century on, this new scientific worldview seriously questioned the authority of classical or scholastic theology. For example, this period noted the increasing use of the historical-critical study of scripture which, among other things, overturns a naively literal reading of the New Testament regarding church organization and stable leadership and the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist (Kilmartin 1989, 527–47). Further, modern, scientific worldviews encouraged an explosion of confidence in what the human mind can achieve and an almost unbridled attention to the thinking subject as sole norm for determining sure truth. However, from the turn of the twentieth century, philosophers, scientists, and theologians have realized that, as marvelous as they might be, modern, scientific views of the cosmos are themselves inadequate to the human effort to make sense of reality and to lead to human prosperity. Thus, dissatisfaction with both classical philosophy and theology as well as the fruits of modern science has given us what we call “postmodernity,” a school of thought which has named the negative effects of the classical worldview in terms of its inability to grasp the dynamic nature of the faith, and the inadequacy of modern worldviews in terms of their abuse of persons and the earth. In The End of the Modern World: A Search for Orientation, the late Romano Guardini articulated the negative impact
of the modern scientific worldview upon our very competence to engage in the public worship of the Church (passim, i.e., “here and there”).

The ongoing critique of the classical theological language world, even though it continues in some ecclesial documents, is bound to call into question the presuppositions that grounded the theological isolation of the words of institution or “moment of consecration,” with its associated language of substance, accidents, and causality, as well as the intimately related understanding of ministerial priesthood and devotional practices. It is predictable that these developments would affect our understanding of the central act of worship of God we know as the Eucharist. In short, historically conscious faith that seeks understanding calls for self-critical means, rooted in biblical scholarship, to evaluate our subjective expectations and practices.

This self-criticism has revealed an improvisational attitude on the part of both the presumed “right” and “left.” We could speak of a degree of divergence from or layering onto the liturgical order that often endangers the biblical meaning of the celebration for Catholic Christian life.

Rubricism and Its Reverse

In the years since Vatican II, efforts were made to overcome the rubricism attributed to the Tridentine liturgical reforms. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) responded to many behavioral abuses. Accounts of pre-Tridentine life speak of ministerial priests who strayed from or added things in the context of the Mass to the point that their actions violated the meaning of the Mass. Among these abuses were extended elevations of host and cup, the making of multiple cross-gestures during the Eucharistic Prayer, and lengthy genuflections at the words of institution.

In response to these abuses, the Council of Trent mandated the reform of the Mass, promulgated in the Roman Missal of 1570. However, it is important to recall that these reforms were engaged from within the classical worldview, the pyramidal diagram of which appeared in catechisms and in our church history books. In that 1570 Missal, directives were printed in red (hence, rubrics) to direct the priest, the central figure in the Tridentine theological account of the Eucharist, in doing and saying what the rite was thought to mean from within that theological synthesis. The purpose of this legislation was to prohibit clerical behavior that gave false meaning to the rites.

However, generally, neither clergy nor laity were well educated in the theology of the Mass. Consequently, a sense grew that the Mass was effective of the grace of the Cross simply because the externals were observed. Such was and is rubricism, the presumption that following the rubrics, that is, the external directives, constitutes validity. It was and is this acute attention to the rubrics pertaining to the role of the ministerial priest, rather than to the deep pattern of the entire Mass, which would lead to a sense of near magic surrounding the words attributed to...
Jesus in the Last Supper narratives. As such, it is an example of the reductionist or minimalist notion of the “matter (bread and wine) and form (words of institution)” of the Eucharistic celebration (Vorgrimler, 160–63). In short, the purpose of Trent’s reforms was not to say that the rubrics make a sacrament a sacrament, but to keep the clergy from diverging from or layering onto the rite through actions that violated the then-current theology of the Mass according to the faith of the Church.

In our efforts to appreciate the attitudes and reactions on both the “right” and the “left” regarding the Eucharist, it is significant to note that the entire scholastic Tridentine teaching only accounted for the actions of the ministerial priest in relation to Christ in the celebration of the Mass. Fortunately, the Roman Church retained the entire Eucharistic Prayer, even though official Catholic theology only accounted for the consequences of the words of institution. This theological, catechetical, and pastoral emphasis gave the unhappy impression of the faithful as passive recipients of grace, so long as serious sin was absent (Kilmartin 1981, 18–22).

**Sacraments Accomplish What They Mean**

The insights of the nineteenth century biblical movement and the initial stage of the liturgical movement, which drew on modern textual research, would gradually question the adequacy of the classical scholastic account of the Mass that concentrated so heavily upon the meaning of the words attributed to Jesus in the Last Supper narratives. During the twentieth century, Pope Pius XII issued three encyclicals pertinent to our topic. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (“On Divine Inspiration,” 1943) approved the use of the historical-critical method of biblical study; *Mystici Corporis* (“On the Mystical Body,” 1945) continued the gradual retrieval of an ecclesiology of common-union, that is, the biblical understanding of the Church as a communion of persons knit to Christ by the working of the Spirit; and *Mediator Dei* (“The One Mediator of God,” 1947) was the first document since Trent to mandate the restoration of the public worship of the Church. More recently, the documents of Vatican II voiced the profound retrieval of the participation of all the baptized in the one priesthood of Christ. Important for our reflection here is the fact that the CSL renewed attention to the “sign value” of our common worship, that is, what and how liturgical words, gestures, and objects “mean” to participants (no. 7).

Medieval theology of the Mass and other liturgies had said *sacramenta significando causant* (sacraments cause by signifying/meaning), while not developing the “by signifying/meaning” portion of the dictum. In addition to criticism of the resulting minimalist use of symbols such as water, bread, wine, oil and so on, the attention of Vatican II to “signification,” that is, how symbolic words and actions communicate meaning to participants, has served as well to highlight the symbolic function of leadership in the name of the Church and thus in the person of Christ,
the One Head of the Church. Immediately recognizing the power of the reformed rites to speak an ecclesiology other than that of Trent and neo-scholastic theology, traditionalist movements petitioned to retain the Mass of Trent.

Universal and Ministerial Priesthood

The genuine appropriation of the truth of the universal priesthood of all believers and how it is best expressed has been a challenge since the promulgation of the Missal of Pope Paul VI in 1970. Although for centuries the term priesthood was widely understood to refer to ministerial priests, the faithful are now in the position to integrate this retrieval into an account of the relationships of mutual accountability within the celebration of the Eucharist and throughout Catholic Christian life. Several issues are in play around this notion of ministerial priest.

To speak of Jesus as mediator between God and humanity, the Letter to the Hebrews uses the metaphor “High Priest” to draw an analogy and a distinction between Old Testament priesthood and the priesthood of Jesus (Heb 5:5; 5:10; 6:20; 7:1; 7:11-12; 7:15 and 17). The author does not intend to say that Jesus is a ministerial priest. Rather, the author’s purpose is to distinguish the once-for-all time saving activity of Jesus on the cross from the need to repeat grain or animal sacrifices according to Jewish Law. That is, if Jewish priests repeated the offering of animals in the past, now, by contrast, the Anointed One offers humanity to God by offering his own person in and through the flesh he shares with humanity. Because Jesus is the eternal Word/Wisdom of God made flesh, his self-offering (sacrifice) is in no need of repetition (Burke, 928–33). The implications of the metaphor “High Priest” and its use as an analogy to the role of Jesus were all but lost in the scholastic theological synthesis.

When theology conceptually severed the risen Christ from the Church and placed him “in heaven,” it then needed to explain the fact and the manner of the presence of Christ in the liturgy. With this move, theology identified the actions of the ministerial priest with that of Jesus. A study of the ordination rites of the Church reveals the insertion of the expression “You are a priest forever” as attributed to the ministerial priest. It seems to me that the consequences of this mystification between ministerial priests and Jesus could well be one source of clericalism. And, it is understandable, if regrettable, that, in reaction to the Tridentine emphasis on this conflation, some persons have confused the notion of the universal priesthood of all believers with the ministerial priesthood.

Assumptions Underlying Eucharistic Practice and Theology

Through baptism, Christians share in the liberating mission of Christ and are bound to accomplish it for the coming of the reign of God. The celebration
of the Eucharist is the corporate way in which Christians affirm their origin in the ministry and total self-offering of Jesus on the cross to God. However, that perception has been profoundly influenced by Greek philosophical thought, especially the interpretation of the Resurrection and Ascension (Martelet, 122–46). Indeed, it seems clear that Greek thought and social authority structures were rather uncritically absorbed into Christian practice and thinking.

The sixth-century author known as Dionysius, presumed to have been the companion of St. Paul at Athens (Acts 17:33-34), was in fact a thorough-going neo-Platonist. His work, *The Heavenly Hierarchy*, describes the Divine One at the pinnacle of a descending hierarchy of angels. Presuming that this image governs earthly life, Dionysius wrote *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* as descriptive of the local church. Having invented the word *hierarchy*, he lists in descending order the bishop (hierarch), priest, and deacon, followed by monks, the baptized, catechumens, penitents, and the possessed. Inherent in this descending set of hierarchies is the presumption that, while all participate in the Divine, those higher on the scale constitute the channel of that participation for those lower than themselves (Rorem, 20–30). Thus, as the Church absorbed Greek cultural practices and thought patterns, this description of the local church was ready at hand as a model for the organization of the whole Church. Therein, the association of the bishop-hierarch and priest with the risen Christ “in heaven” is immediate. Logically, ordained ministers were interpreted as channels of the grace of Christ in the celebration of the sacraments. The inference that Dionysius was describing what the historical Jesus had set in motion has had an astounding influence upon subsequent Christian practice and thought.

By the ninth century, the theology of the Eucharist did not directly consider the entire liturgical assembly, but focused on the role of the ministerial priest, acting *in the person of Christ* as an actor playing a role, on the fact and manner of the transformation of bread and wine, to the near oblivion of the radically social-ethical meaning of the Body of Christ. The tenth century witnessed to this oblivion in the rise of “exposition-for-viewing” of the reserved sacrament, since the regular participation in Bread and Cup had ceased (Mitchell, 66–86).

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the increased use of the language of Greek philosophy, like substance, accidents, efficacy, and causality. In this theological interpretation, the ordained priest was said to receive the personal power to repeat and actualize the words of Jesus, and, hence, to be an instrumental
cause of the presence of the crucified and risen Christ through the change of the substance (transubstantiation) of material elements. Clearly, scholastic theology found it difficult to make a full account of the modes of the one presence of Christ in the assembly, the Liturgy of the Word, the consecratory meaning of the entire Eucharistic Prayer, or of the completion of the sacrifice through participation in Bread and Cup. This theological and pastoral disposition lasted until the biblical and liturgical movements found their efforts given expression in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

Even among those who hail the achievements of contemporary theology, the centuries-long influence of scholasticism upon the subjective expectation about the meaning of the Mass continues to effect resistance to the spiritual, moral and liturgical reforms of Vatican II. It is sometimes presumed that the only options are either a slavish adherence to rubrics or a casual disregard of them. Layering onto and diverging from the rite can occur on both the “right” and the “left.”

A Living Tradition

Deep, unspoken assumptions are powerful precisely because they lie below our conscious thought and practice. This reflection has placed the current tensions in our liturgical lives under review. At this time in our reception of Vatican II, there has arisen an unfortunate tension between a Eucharistic theology centered on the ministerial priest and the words of institution, on the one hand, and the New Testament theology emphasized by Vatican II. Here, the Church retrieved the meaning of baptism into the total self-offering of the Lord by the working of the Holy Spirit by asserting that “in the liturgy full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members” (CSL, no. 7).

We have before us a challenge to grasp the significance of historical consciousness, the awareness that all that is said and done is to be understood in relation to its historical context. With this in mind, we are all encouraged to examine the text-in-action that we know as the celebration of the Eucharist. If it is true that the liturgy of the Eucharist brings about what it means, it is incumbent upon us all to evaluate what we do and the way we do it to see whether the actions we engage in are a model of what the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says we believe and a model for what we believe.

If one begins with the meaning of baptism as an insertion into a set of relationships with Christ and each other in his total self-offering (Romans 6), then the universal priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood that serves that mystery are not in competition. Our very postmodern world, so filled with the anxiety that comes from profound pluralism of beliefs, seems to have created the atmosphere that anyone can now simply choose to return to pre-Vatican II.
ministerial priest-centered practice. It seems to me that this is to seek security in the denial of the development of the living Tradition.

No one can take back the New Pentecost that we have known in Vatican II. We, like the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus away from Jerusalem, have had our hope for the renewal of the worship of the Church bruised. It is to us that the Christ among us asks, “Why are you so sad?” And again and again, Sunday after Sunday, we hear Christ interpret our lives to us, beginning with all of our ancestors. In this broad panorama of the saints, our hearts can burn within us with hope. We continue to participate in the Body of Christ, the bond of our common-union, and in the Blood of the Cross, our origin and our peace. These are the best of times, for we know that the Spirit is always conforming us to the Christ in this Church that we love. And even if, with Dickens, we are tempted to think of them as the worst of times, we hear the words of St. Paul: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5:16-22).

References


